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**A Critical Edition**  
**of**  
**Derek Walcott's *Omeros***

**Part 1 – Critical Introduction**

**by**  
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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements**  
**for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**  
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## Table of Contents

### Part 1 – Critical Introduction

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Narrative</b>	
2.1 Themes	4
2.2 Achille, Hector and Helen	5
2.3 Philoctete and Ma Kilman	6
2.4 Dennis and Maud Plunkett	7
2.5 The Narrator	8
2.6 Structure	9
2.7 Timelines	10
2.8 Epic Features	12
2.9 Myth-making	18
<b>3. Settings</b>	
3.1 Walcott's Geography	21
3.2 Gros Îlet, St Lucia, the Caribbean	22
3.3 Africa	27
3.4 North America	29
3.5 Europe	31
<b>4. Metaphor and Paronomasia</b>	
4.1 Metaphor	34
4.2 Paronomasia	41
<b>5. Symbolism</b>	
5.1 The Risk of Allegory	45
5.2 The Iguana	46
5.3 The Island	47
5.4 The Sea	47
5.5 The Sunrise	49
5.6 The Dog	49
5.7 The Wound	50
5.8 The Swift	52
5.9 Sewing	54
5.10 The Canoe	55

5.11 The Light	56
5.12 The Garden	57
6. Historiography	
6.1 The Rejection of History	59
6.2 Historical Fact	60
6.3 Classical Myth	61
7. Intertexts	
7.1 Borrow and Appropriate	65
7.2 Homer and Virgil	66
7.3 Dante	67
7.4 Hemingway	71
7.5 Heaney	72
7.6 Auslander	74
7.7 Walcott	76
7.8 Other Sources	78
8. Dualism	
8.1 Contradiction	80
8.2 Pairings	81
8.3 Dualism not Binarism	83
9. Autobiography	
9.1 The Stuff of his Life	88
9.2 Warwick and Alix	88
9.3 Norline	91
9.4 Introspection	92
9.5 Father Jesse	93
9.6 Other Models	95
9.7 Walcott the Writer	95
10. Dialects	
10.1 Walcott's Languages	98
10.2 Choosing the Third Way	99
10.3 Writing Back	101
10.4 The Vernacular	103
10.5 Moderation	105
11. Prosody	

11.1 Metre	107
11.2 Form	109
11.3 Classical Metrics	112
11.4 Phrasal Prosody	118
11.5 Caesurae	120
11.6 Humour	121
11.7 Section XXXIII/iii	123
11.8 Numerology	125
12. Conclusion	131

## Bibliography

## Appendix A Rhyme Types Used in *Omeros*

## Appendix B Structure of Chapter XXXIII/iii of *Omeros*

## Tables

7.4.1 Correspondences between <i>Omeros</i> and <i>The Old Man and the Sea</i>	72
11.8.1 Frequency of occurrence of names in <i>Omeros</i>	128

## Part 2 – Annotations to *Omeros*

Introduction	1
Book 1	2
Book 2	90
Book 3	131
Book 4	159
Book 5	180
Book 6	208
Book 7	242

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## Declaration

The contents of this thesis are my own work except where references are given to published sources by other authors. The work is based wholly on studies undertaken for this degree and none of my findings have previously been published. The thesis has not been submitted for a degree at any other institution.

## Abstract

The thesis is a Critical Edition of Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, consisting of a Critical Introduction and Annotations. The Critical Introduction analyses:

- Narrative
- Settings
- Metaphor and Paronomasia
- Symbolism
- Historiography
- Intertexts
- Dualism
- Autobiography
- Dialects
- Prosody.

The Annotations comment on more than 1000 references that may be obscure and on specifics of narrative, language and prosody.

This study presents new conclusions about some aspects of *Omeros*:

- It challenges the prevailing view that the work is written substantially in a variation of *terza rima* and shows that regular quatrains predominate.
- It demonstrates ways in which the metrics follow the sense of the narrative and takes a more balanced position on the use of Caribbean as opposed to classical metrics than that put forward previously.
- It identifies a paragraphic structure to the verse.
- It proposes a new prosodic structure for the significant Chapter XXX/iii.
- It extends Walcott's recognised use of numerology into word counting the names of characters.
- It develops the idea of Walcott's dualism and his use of pairing and contradiction as a dialectical method.
- It defines his wide use of paronomasia and shows that many of the puns have a metaphorical aspect beyond mere word-play.
- It analyses some of Walcott's symbolism.
- It identifies intertextual links to his earlier works and to some thirty other writers, and suggests homage to Hemingway and possibly Heaney.
- It provides the first complete analysis of Walcott's rhyme types in *Omeros*.

In its analysis of *Omeros* and in the Annotations it has included commentary from across the critical literature, to provide some sense of other views on Walcott's writing, and has included as many as possible of Walcott's own comments on *Omeros* and on the writer's task, as a background to understanding the poem.

## 1. Introduction

*Once upon a time\**

This is how myths become universal and durable: treating the big themes - birth and death, loyalty and betrayal, loss and questing, victory and defeat, love and hatred. For centuries, writers have retold them for their own times and places. *Omeros* treats all of these, but adds others: exile and identity, exploitation and resistance, figuration and reality. In doing so it belies its title. It does not simply transplant the classic Homeric myths from one archipelago and era to another.

That would contradict Walcott's understanding of myth. Burnett writes, 'To Walcott, myths confer cultural identity [...] Distinctively, he sees geography as the determinant.'<sup>1</sup> In his words: 'Where have cultures originated? By the force of natural surroundings. You build according to the topography of where you live...[Y]ou mystify what you see, you create what you need spiritually, a god for each need.'<sup>2</sup> Homer's gods and heroes are not Walcott's. They do not meet his need for a myth for his own time and place.

Also, Walcott has said, 'I did not plan this book so it would be a template of the Homeric original because that would be an absurdity [...] you would be doing a third

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\* The epigraphs are from Seamus Heaney's poem 'Seeing Things' (from *Seeing Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 1991). See Critical Introduction: Intertexts: 7.5 Heaney for reasons to use this poem.

<sup>1</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), p. 94

<sup>2</sup> Derek Walcott, 'The Caribbean, Culture or Mimicry?' reprinted in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott* ed. by Robert D. Hamner (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), p. 56



version of the *Odyssey* via Joyce.’<sup>3</sup> He rejects such mimicry and sets himself a more heroic aim, a new way of seeing St Lucia and the Caribbean in a language beyond history, a ‘light beyond metaphor’ (LIV/iii/4 – references to *Omeros* are given as Chapter/Section/Stanza).

It is not a straightforward text, or even one in which layers of meaning may be peeled away one by one. Everything resonates with everything else. Walcott said of it, ‘So the book is really not about a model of another poem; it is really about associations, or references, because that is what we are in the Americas: we are a culture of references, not of certainties’.<sup>4</sup> A trans-oceanic, pan-historic range of material combines with a virtuoso poetic form.

Subtle and highly-informed, dealing in ideas a lifetime in the developing, the poem is deeply referential, both to Walcott’s life and previous work and to his literary masters. Hamner suggests that various of Walcott’s earlier writings show his development towards the composition of *Omeros*: *Henri Christophe* (1950), *Drums and Colours* (1958), *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (premiered 1967), *Another Life* (1973), ‘The Schooner *Flight*’ (from *the Star-Apple Kingdom* 1979), ‘The Light of the World’ (from *The Arkansas Testament* 1979) and *The Ghost Dance* (premiered 1989).<sup>5</sup>

Walcott’s themes, symbols and imagery have developed by association, accretion and transmutation over many years. King writes (of *Another Life*, Walcott’s earlier autobiographical long-poem), ‘[It] is a symphony of styles, influences, imitations,

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<sup>3</sup> Derek Walcott, ‘Reflections on *Omeros*’, in *The Poetics of Derek Walcott: Intertextual Perspectives* ed. by Gregson Davis in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 96 Vol. 2 (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 230-231.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Walcott, ‘Reflections on ‘*Omeros*’, p. 239.

<sup>5</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed. Derek Walcott’s Omeros* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997) pp. 18-28.

echoes, colours, recurring themes, reharmonizations'.<sup>6</sup> A similar metaphor could be applied to *Omeros*, an organ piece in which the registers are many. This Critical Introduction explores ten of them across the whole of the poem: Narrative, Settings, Metaphor and Paranomasia, Symbolism, Historiography, Intertexts, Dualism, Autobiography, Dialects and Prosody. Together, these artificially selected views allow a rich and recursive text to be analysed with more clarity than would a straightforward sequential approach to the whole.

In doing so, it will bear in mind, as Walcott pointed out early in his writings, that the original impulses of language are worship and communication.<sup>7</sup> It will also draw in as much as is practical of the extensive critical literature on Walcott and *Omeros*.

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 310.

<sup>7</sup> Derek Walcott, 'Necessity of Negritude' (1964), reprinted in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott* ed. by Hamner, p. 22.

## 2. Narrative

### *Claritas*

### 2.1 Themes

As early as 1958, with 'Tales of the Islands', Walcott was experimenting with narration in his poems.<sup>1</sup> Asked of *Omeros* if he felt as if he were writing a novel, he said, 'not a novel, but I have felt for a long time that poetry has surrendered too much of what it used to do. The novel used to be an epic poem...'<sup>2</sup> He has also written, of another aspect of his 'divided' personality, that 'The mimetic, the Narrative, and dance element is strong on one side, and the literary, the classical tradition is strong on the other.'<sup>3</sup>

As might be expected from this, narrative plays a major part in *Omeros*, as medium and motor. On the latter, Walcott said, of his jump-cutting between story lines, 'That kind of editing keeps the story going, because about four or five of them going at the same time help the propulsion of the narrative.'<sup>4</sup>

There are four main story lines, interwoven and touching one another at some points. Though the Narrator's is the binding one, none dominates and they provide differing approaches to the main themes of the poem:

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Walcott, *In a Green Night* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962), pp. 26-30.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Rebekah Presson, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, ed. by William Baer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Walcott, 'Meanings' (1970) in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott* ed. by Hamner, p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Rebekah Presson, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 191.

- **exile and identity**, expressed as a longing for name and home and a desire to return to some earlier rootedness. This is resolved through the healing of past wounds and stitching together old and new worlds (in all senses of those words) across a timeless sea;
- **exploitation and resistance**, expressed through the extermination of the native Americans and through slavery, colonialism and the neo-colonialism of the tourist trade. This is resolved by a refusal to yield self to the new commercialism;
- **figuration and reality**, expressed as the fight to escape the deterministic, imported metaphors of a Eurocentric tradition. This is resolved by rejecting both Art and History and by discovering a liberated language that describes the islanders as they really are.

## 2.2 Achille, Hector and Helen

One story is the love triangle between two fishermen, Achille and Hector, and the maid/waitress Helen. Achille loses Helen to Hector but eventually, after Hector's death, she returns to him.

The story contrasts the characters of Achille, the slow traditionalist who keeps to the old ways of fishing, and Hector, the modern go-getter who sells his canoe and turns to the reckless taxi-driving that will kill him. Achille hallucinates a return to Africa in which he meets his father/ancestor Afolabe and is chided for the loss of his African name, while Hector buys The Comet, a transport in which his passengers slide between two worlds, part atavistic in its African leopard-skin seats, part shooting

them 'to an Icarian future they could not control' (XXII/ii/4-5), reflecting Walcott's fears for St Lucia.

Helen, who represents the island ('the Helen of the West Indies' because it was much fought over) is beautiful, pleasure-loving, mercurial, and pregnant to Hector or Achille. The story ends with her resisting Achille giving her future child an African name. The issue is unresolved (puns being one facet of this book).

### 2.3 Philoctete and Ma Kilman

Another story concerns the suffering of Philoctete from his ancestral wound and his cure by Ma Kilman.

His suppurating shin, scraped by a rusty anchor (symbolising being torn from his African roots), cuts Philoctete off from his fellow fishermen and he turns to rum in Ma Kilman's bar. He tends a yam garden where after a crisis of agony he resolves to suffer patiently. He plays the peace-maker between Achille and Hector without success, comforts Achille after Hector's death and later voyages with him in his abortive search for a home he finally accepts is where he lives. It is Achille and Philoctete who play out the traditional African dance rites on the day after Christmas and Philoctete who will stand godfather to Helen's child.

The key passage in Philoctete's story is his bathing by Ma Kilman, who spans two worlds, going to Mass then searching out the African plant she brews to cure him. She is everyone's grandmother, sibyl, obeah-woman, her cracked glasses webbed by

Anancy giving her second sight. Philoctete is likened to the Caribbean with his  
'knuckled spine like islands' (XLIX/i/6) and he emerges as Adam in a new Eden.

Ramazani dissects Philoctete's character in detail, finding in him elements of  
Philoctetes and Caliban, Eliot's Fisher King, Adonis, Parsifal and Adam.<sup>5</sup>

## 2.4 Dennis and Maud Plunkett

The third story is of the love of 'Major' Plunkett and his wife Maud, and Plunkett's  
obsessive search for a history for Helen/St Lucia.

He is an ex-colonial sergeant-major who suffered a head-wound in the North African  
campaign and feels strongly for the common man and against those with the upper  
hand in the class war. He has made the passage to an island where he hopes to find a  
home. For love and loyalty to him, Maud is in exile from her beloved Ireland. He  
neglects and bullies her, but is devastated with loss and guilt at her death, a second  
wound from which he slowly recovers, helped by learning to see the islanders as men  
and comforted by a quilt into which Maud had stitched all the island's birds.

Plunkett's obsession with St Lucia's history stems from a unfulfilled lust for Helen,  
but quickly becomes a search for a son/ancestor in the figure of a midshipman  
Plunkett who died in the Battle of the Saints. This illusory connection is another of  
the father/son tropes in the book, along with Afolabe/Achille and the Narrator and his  
father, Warwick.

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<sup>5</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse, Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 56-59

Plunkett's other role in the poem is as foil to the Narrator. His historical approach to Helen as a metaphor for the island is as futile as the Narrator's literary one: 'There, in her head of ebony,/there was no real need for the historian's/remorse, nor for literature's' (LIV/ii/8). Davis sees him as Maecenas to Walcott's Horace, matching Walcott in counterpoint.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.5 The Narrator

The Narrator's is the fourth story in the book and binds all of them together.

Though some parallels may be drawn between Walcott and other characters (Philoctete's longing for roots and his self-hatred at the lack of them, Achille's absent father, Hector's abandoning of the traditional island ways, Plunkett's lust and ill-treatment of his wife), it is the Narrator who is the explicit embodiment of the author; his father in the book is named Warwick and his mother in the book has three children, Derek, Roddy and Pam.

Through his Narrator's wanderings, Walcott is able to draw in scenes and events in North America, Europe, Ireland and England that bear on the themes of the book. The Narrator goes back in time to receive his literary charge from his father, to write about the islanders, and is shown how Fame is the liner that will leave the island, something 'much finer,/.../than anything Castries could ever hope to build.' (XIII/ii/3-4). He is charged: 'Kneel to your load, then balance your staggering feet/and walk up

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<sup>6</sup> Gregson Davis, ' "With No Homeric Shadow": The Disavowal of Epic in *Omeros*', printed in *The Poetics of Derek Walcott: Intertextual Perspectives*, p. 327.

that coal ladder as they do in time/one bare foot after the next in ancestral rhyme.' (XIII/iii/6) and 'give those feet a voice.' (XIII/iii/12).

His eventual cure from the same wound as Philoctete is to move beyond classical metaphor, '[a]ll that Greek manure' (LIV/iii/1), and to see and write about the island as it really is. Not least, the presence of Walcott in the poem, in the figure of his Narrator, allows the writing of *Omeros* to be itself part of the story. The poet is narcissistic, watching himself grasp the pen and struggle with his Muse and his demons.

## 2.6 Structure

The last chapters of the poem bring things to a conclusion almost as a novel would. The main characters find their pain eased and almost all are in some way transformed from what they were at the beginning of the poem. Philoctete is healed of his wound and at peace with his loss of Africa, Plunkett is healed of both his wounds (from The War and the death of his wife) and is transformed into a better person, the Narrator is cured of his classical delusion and his love of picturesque poverty and contemplates the end of his labours, Maud and Hector are dead and also therefore at peace, Helen is again a waitress and content in her pregnancy, no longer the 'wild wife' who sought an affair with Hector. Only Achille, secure in his role as Helen's provider and lover, seems unchanged. He has something of the eternal quality of the sea in him. The swift too departs, its job of stitching together the African and New World heritages done.



There is an overall shape to the development of these story-lines and the broader ideas that they host. In the first two-thirds of the book Walcott adopts positions that he contradicts in the final third. From Book Six onwards the story lines begin to unwind and tropes used in the earlier Books are reversed.

Events from the earlier Books are repeated in transformed form – instead of the Narrator seeing Ahab in a taxi (prejudice and destructive ‘progress’) Achille and Philoctete see whales (indifferent Nature and God), Achille showers (in preparation for traditional ritual) instead of Helen (for corrupting pleasure-seeking), Seven Seas no longer beats out the rhythm of Greek oars with his finger, Achille no longer dreams of Africa and finds home where he was born, Plunkett walks the harbour as Midshipman Plunkett had done and is now seen as belonging on the island.

Walcott drew attention to some of this when he said:

the last third of [*Omeros*] is a total refutation of the efforts made by two characters. First, there is the effort made by the historian, Plunkett, to make a woman he has fallen in love with grander and nobler [...] The second effort is made by the writer, or narrator (presumably me, if you like) who [...] compares this island woman to Helen of Troy.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.7 Timelines

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<sup>7</sup> Derek Walcott, ‘Reflections on *Omeros*’, pp. 232-3.

The stories parallel and intertwine with one another in their development towards crisis and conclusion. Hamner said, 'The result is a layered and essentially reciprocal complex of interrelated narrative lines'.<sup>8</sup> Walcott uses recursive plots to convey the complexities of human interaction and motivation. He moves from plot to plot and backwards and forwards in time, following the resonances of events. Asked about his manipulation of time in his plays, he said, 'Once you have a strong or accepted narrator, and once the audience gets into the rhythm of a piece, time ceases to be a problem. If the rhythm is strong, there is no need to show an interval as progressing chronologically.'<sup>9</sup>

As Walcott says (LVIII/ii/6) of his authorial persona, 'he plays tricks with time'.

There are numerous shifts between present, past and future tenses in the first section of Chapter I. After that, though the tense settles to the past-simple more usual in narrative, Walcott resets his story to different points in the past as the action moves from one character to another. As the poem proceeds, he moves into the present occasionally (XXXIII/iii and LXIV/ii, for example) and drops centuries back at other points (XLI/i and XLIII/i).

Underlying this fluidity is a unifying timeline. The action of the four main narratives moves through about 9 months, paralleling Helen's pregnancy. By VI/i the narratives are established and Helen is pregnant. In IX/i the story enters the hurricane season (June to November in St Lucia). X/i is in mid-July, XLI/iii in October and XLII/ii in November. LV/i begins with Christmas and LVI/I to LX/i are in January. Helen is

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<sup>8</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed. Derek Walcott's Omeros*, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Sharon Ciccarelli, 'Reflections Before and After Carnival' (1977), reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 36.

still pregnant in LXIV/ii, probably in late January, as all four story lines are brought to an end.

The freedom, some would say complexity, of structure is reminiscent of St.-John Perse's method with imagery in *Anabasis*. In his preface to his translation, Eliot said, 'The reader has to allow the images to fall into his memory successively without questioning the reasonableness of each at the moment; so that, at the end, a total effect is produced.'<sup>10</sup> St.-John Perse is one of the Caribbean precursors Walcott will have looked to when contemplating his own substantially-autobiographical long-poems. He spoke of him when accepting his Nobel Prize, 'before him, there was nothing as fresh and clear in feeling[...] At last, the first breeze on the page, salt-edged.'<sup>11</sup>

Perse used images now familiar in Walcott: trees as masts with rigging, Crusoe, the transplanted seed, the poet as Storyteller, even a wound (of the sugar cane).<sup>12</sup> How much of these remained to be broken down and reformed in Walcott's new brew is less relevant than the broader character of St.-John Perse's writing. Walcott will have seen in him a sensuality of recollection, a feeling for colours and light, lyricism and readiness to write of familial and familiar doings among black servants and the local people.

## 2.8 Epic Features

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<sup>10</sup> T. S. Eliot, 1931 preface to *Anabasis* by St.-John Perse (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 10

<sup>11</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory: Nobel Lecture 1992* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), included in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 77-8.

<sup>12</sup> St.-John Perse, *Éloges and Other Poems* (1911) (New York: Pantheon, 1956), pp. 11, 51, 61, 45, 13.

Is *Omeros* an epic, in the genre sense? Immediately after writing it, Walcott said ‘Yes. I would think that the design of it, yes’.<sup>13</sup> His later disclaimers of intent still leave openings for qualification or doubt. They may stem from a wish to avoid reductive comparisons or to deflect anti-Eurocentric criticism, to leave us only what *Omeros* says about his un-‘heroic’ Caribbean Greeks, ‘But they crossed, they survived. There is the epical splendour.’ (XXVIII/i/9).

Walcott said, ‘All I wanted to do was celebrate the diurnal, day-to-day heroism of people who go out and face the arrogance’,<sup>14</sup> not in itself a denial of the epic status of the poem. He admitted it had elements of epic – width, variety, heroes, in a way – but was not so presumptuous as to set out to redeem history. He preceded this with a comment that Whitman ‘doesn’t do what we know to be epic, in terms of a narrator propelling – in sequence – the events that are related to the destiny of the tribe.’ However, that is what Walcott has done with his characters, while at the same time saying, rightly, that it is a very intimate work.<sup>15</sup>

The actors and instigators in *Omeros* are not gods or kings or generals. Walcott has said, ‘Power itself is ephemeral, unstable. It is the least important aspect of any culture, who rules.’<sup>16</sup> His heroes are ordinary, unrecognised until he created them, but their ancestral histories and the events of their lives bear on the destiny of the tribe.

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<sup>13</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J. P. White (*Green Mountains Review*, Vol 4, No 1, 1990) reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott* ed William Baer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 1996) p. 174.

<sup>14</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Luigi Sampietro, *Caribana 3, A Review of Caribbean Literatures* (1992/93)

<sup>15</sup> Derek Walcott, *Reflections on ‘Omeros’* ed. by Gregson Davis, p. 240

<sup>16</sup> Derek Walcott, ‘The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?’ (in *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, Vol 16 No. 1, February 1974) (Miami: University of Miami, 1974), p. 51.

Walcott spelled it out twenty years or so previously in *Another Life*, a passage that Baugh finds in its original manuscript dated from 1965:<sup>17</sup>

Christ, to shake off the cerecloths,  
to stride from the magnetic sphere of legends,  
from the gigantic myth.  
To change the marble sweat which pebbled  
the wave-blow of stone brows  
for this sweat-drop on the cedar plank,  
for a future without heroes,  
to make out of these foresters and fishermen  
heraldic men!<sup>18</sup>

Not for the first time, Walcott chooses to stand on both sides of the question. Even his ultimate repudiation of the Greek metaphor leaves us oscillating between Achille and Achilles (LXIV/iii/3-4, 8, 10) and Greek Achilles only finally departs ten lines from the end of the poem. Gregson Davis has seen this promotion-then-rejection of the Homeric as *recusatio*, allowing Walcott to deny the Greek associations, while still leaving those resonances to persist in the reader's mind.<sup>19</sup>

This ambivalence is not mischievous, for he sees Homer's *Odyssey* as 'a domestic novel [about] a very small local reality', only regarded as 'epic' because of where we

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<sup>17</sup> Edward Baugh, *Derek Walcott, (Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh, *Derek Walcott, Another Life, fully annotated* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004), lines 1762-1770

<sup>19</sup> Gregson Davis, ' "With no Homeric Shadow": the Disavowal of Epic in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*', p. 328.

are today. Homer's genius is 'something that comes out of that reality'.<sup>20</sup> This domestic scale is only apparent, of course, for the themes are much wider, universal. Elsewhere, Walcott said, 'epic does not have self-conscious width, it has natural width...you inhale and exhale an epic as naturally as if you inhale the air.'<sup>21</sup>

Hamner has pointed out that none of the principal elements of epic have remained intact from generation to generation.<sup>22</sup> Walcott has creolised the epic conventions to produce what Hamner termed an epic of the dispossessed. His protagonists are not kings or folk-heroes but simply folk in their Caribbean 'dignity... suppleness... beauty'.<sup>23</sup> The gods are Aruac ones and trees, or African, rarely Olympian. His invocation of the muse is 'O open this day with the conch's moan, *Omeros*', both Greek and Caribbean in its reference. His vision is of a village beauty, Helen. His epic catalogues are not of warriors' names, but of fishermen, birds, trees. His descent to the underworld is to the bottom of the sea or to the local volcanic springs. His Narrator is a wanderer, searching for himself and a voice. Nevertheless, familiar epic traditions exist: the *nostos* or return home, the questioning of the ancestors.

In other respects, he seems to contradict the conventions. He launches the book not *in medias res* but after the main action has ended, then has several chapters of scene-setting daily life (daily life is in fact the stuff of his epic). Only in Chapter VI does he ask, 'Where did it start?' His epic question comes not at the beginning but at XXIV/ii/30, when Achilles asks himself who he is. His epic invocation comes even

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<sup>20</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular* (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 281-2 and 195.

<sup>21</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J. P. White, *Green Mountains Review*, in *Conversations with Derek Walcott* ed. by William Baer, p. 161.

<sup>22</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed. Derek Walcott's Omeros*, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J. P. White, *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 165.

later, at the opening of the final chapter: 'I sang of quiet Achille' (though his first line in the book ends with 'canoes', maybe a distant echo of Virgil's 'Arma virumque cano'). His Battle of the Saints, recounted in flashback, was fought 200 years before his tale begins and his military references are mainly confined to frequent metaphors for Nature based on arrows, spears and lances, and of course to Achille's brief and unbloodied struggle with Hector. His odysseys take place in dreams and altered memories, his homecomings are symbolic as much as real. His epithets are unheroic: 'foam-haired Philoctete', 'horned island', 'ice-sweating Achille', 'quiet Achille'. His Narrator, the 'I', takes part in the action. Walcott leaves the conventions subverted, appropriately ruined, but recognisable.

Other epic resonances abound in the detail but the stories themselves are in no way a rewriting of the classic tales of Troy and Odysseus. Walcott stated the pointlessness of 'doing a third version of the Odyssey via Joyce'.<sup>24</sup> Breslin writes of his frustration in wondering why *Omeros* should 'lavish so much tortured ingenuity, so much grandiose rhetoric, on analogies it ultimately condemns as pointless, or even pernicious.' After a series of unanswered questions about Walcott's motives, Breslin wonders if the futile persistence in the Homeric parallel enacts Walcott's own frustration in his 'search for a form that harmonises with his experience.'<sup>25</sup> A catharsis, then, in which he is purging himself of all these classical illusions and allusions in order to see the island more clearly as it is. After all, that is what the poem says he is doing. Why not take him at his word?

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<sup>24</sup> Derek Walcott, 'Reflections on *Omeros*' ed. Gregson Davis, p. 231.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 244-5.

Whether that is true or not, there are also simpler motives. His ambitions for the work were large. It needed to bring to fruition a line of writing that stretched back through considerable earlier achievements on similar themes (*Another Life*, 'Sainte Lucie', 'The Schooner *Flight*', *Epitaph for the Young*). A noble project, perhaps. If Walcott wished for his work to have epic status, but wanted to demonstrate its separateness from the Eurocentrism so at odds with emergent West Indian literary culture and national confidence, he needed to raise the Greek parallel specifically in order to reject it. *Recusatio* again, but really meaning it.

The epic essence of the book lies not in the Greek resonances or the subverted conventions but in its breadth and maybe its ambition (denied by its author). It takes exile, oppression, suffering and the search for identity as subjects, roams centuries and an ocean for its action, and seeks nothing less than to celebrate a people. King points out that *Omeros* is a fragmented epic celebrating the building of a fragmented people, St Lucian or Caribbean.<sup>26</sup> He sees its mosaic as representing the still visible differences in a common culture (Walcott's 'white scars' that follow restoration of 'cracked heirlooms'<sup>27</sup>) and therefore corresponding to the notion of creolisation, in contrast to North America's opposites of assimilation or separation.

In taking on this task, Walcott combines the lyric 'I' and the epic 'he' into a form that can be made to fit either genre-label, but which takes his writing to a new point in its development. In 'The Muse of History' he stated, 'The epic poem is not a literary

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<sup>26</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life* p. 518.

<sup>27</sup> Derek Walcott, 'The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory', p. 69.



project. It is already written; it was written in the mouths of the tribe, a tribe which had courageously yielded its history.’<sup>28</sup>

In other words, ‘*epic*’ and ‘*tribe*’ need one another to exist. He writes the one in order that the other may recognise its identity and grasp its Adamic opportunity, but has disclaimed any attempt to inspire a political destiny; his purpose is spiritual, the poem written out of love and gratitude for the island.<sup>29</sup> Whether or not you entirely accept his denial, he has given St Lucians their present (‘it grew a good people’ (LIX/ii/11)) as a basis for self-pride, an alternative to the Africanists’ offer of a past they were robbed of centuries ago.

## 2.9 Myth-making

Walcott also comes close to making his ordinary hero, Achille, both human and mythic. He said to Ciccarelli, ten years before he began to write *Omeros*:

I don’t think one starts out consciously to create myth. The poet encounters many dangers when his work evolves from myth. He might just relate the story in a very one-dimensional manner...without any development of character. or he might lean too heavily on the figures given in the fable, figures that have no psychology... Because we live in a society where myth, superstition and the folk memory are very strong, where ritual celebration abounds, there is the possibility that the character may become more than a psychological figure. This character, because of the vitality of the story-telling

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<sup>28</sup> Derek Walcott, ‘The Muse of History’ in *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> Derek Walcott, ‘Reflections on *Omeros*’ ed. by Gregson Davis, p. 243.

tradition, may move towards the largeness of the mythical figure and still retain the essential quality of manhood.<sup>30</sup>

Achille is flawed with anger and jealousy, spying on Helen, but is proud, honest, hard-working and faithful to her and, eventually, to his friend Hector. He is loved not just by Helen, but by his community. Philoctete and Seven Seas worry about him when he might be lost at sea. His mate lets him sleep when he should be working the boat. So far, so human. Any parallels with the Greek Achilles are minor – anger, sulking – and Walcott does not attempt mimicry of the Greek myth. Nevertheless, as Davis has pointed out, the Homeric shadow is never lost, only hidden from time to time, though necessarily disavowed by its author both in the book, in quest of the fresh vision, and since.<sup>31</sup>

Achille's mythic dimension comes out in the rituals he enacts and in his ability to sense something of the island's own mythic quality, Walcott's view that place defines myth. He leads the assault on the trees, the Aruac gods, fighting nature itself (thorns, mosquitoes, nettles) to turn them into canoes (I/ii/1-16). He feels the way the trees long for the sea and gives his canoe its own distinctive name, setting himself alongside God in the process 'Leave it! Is God' spelling and mine' (I/ii/17-20). His walk to the harbour elevates the daily ritual to something sacred, as he lets nature enter him (I/iii/1-8). His battle in the surf with Hector (III/i/1-12) is the kind that passes into folk-history. He makes his own descent to the underworld, visiting the dead on the sea-floor in his attempt to win Helen back (VIII/ii/1-13). Most of all, transported back in his African reverie, he is sent a sign by God, the sea-swift that leads him into the chapters where he relives the suffering of his people (Chapters

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<sup>30</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Sharon Ciccarelli, 'Reflections Before and After Carnival' (1977), reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, pp. 44-5.

<sup>31</sup> Gregson Davis, *The Poetics of Derek Walcott*, p. 332.

XXV-XXVIII). He anoints himself as well as the frigate bird as he returns to the island with the words 'The king going home'. Walcott elevates him in the final chapter - 'I sang of quiet Achille' (LXIV/i/1) - and ends the book with Achille once more enacting the rituals that define his tribe.

### 3. Settings

*All this in bright sunlight*

#### 3.1 Walcott's Geography

With Walcott, '*tribe*' means not race but community, black, white and khaki. His tribe in *Omeros* is the people of the Lesser Antillean island of St Lucia, his birthplace, with much of the action in and around the village of Gros Îlet. As early as 1962, C. L. R. James had commented, in a review of *In a Green Night*, 'What is the world that he is seeing? It is the West Indies, islands, the sea that surrounds them, and the people, noticeably often, fishermen... I have a curious feeling that most of what he will have to say will be found in these waters.'<sup>1</sup>

On the subject of place, Walcott has said, 'If you go to a peak anywhere in St Lucia, you feel a simultaneous newness and sense of timelessness at the same time – the presence of where you are. It is a primal thing... What we can do as poets in terms of our honesty is simply to write within the immediate perimeter of not more than twenty miles really.'<sup>2</sup> However, all four stories have characters travelling, in memory or in dream-states, to Africa, America or Europe. Wherever they are, they are seen through the eye of St Lucia.

The uprooting implicit in the theme of lost identity is realised in Philoctete's buried memory of the Middle Passage and in Achille's dream journey back to Africa. It is also seen in the Narrator's wanderings to Europe and the USA and in his

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<sup>1</sup> C. L. R. James, 'Here's a Poet Who Sees the Real West Indies' (*Trinidad Guardian*, 6 May 1962).

<sup>2</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Edward Hirsch, 1983, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 105.

conversations with his dead father. It is the essence of the Trail of Tears story. It is a fact, too, for the Plunketts, exiled from the countries of their birth, who have tried to put down roots in St Lucia but are still seen there as incomers. So, though the settings of the poem include St Lucia and the places travelled to, they also include the idea of no place at all, another transformation of Homer, whose Odysseus was both wanderer and 'no man'. Achille sees his reflection in a river 'as if its proper place/lay in unsettlement' (XXVI/ii/3).

The state of 'between' is a geo-political fact, with the Caribbean suspended between the 'home' countries of Empire and the new imperium of US commercial influence, as well as between the old, lost world of Africa and the new dawn in the west. It is also genetic, with many St Lucians of mixed race, not knowing what strains of blood they contain.

Walcott shares in all these 'between' states but, with many of his fellow St Lucians, is also between departing and returning, the opposing pulls of leaving (for economic reasons and for poetic growth) and returning home to the mother island, 'a sail leaving harbour/and a sail coming in' (XIII/ii/2-3). He makes what he calls 'creative use of his schizophrenia'.<sup>3</sup> He embodies the idea of the mulatto as source of vigour, vitality, creativity.

### 3.2 Gros Îlet, St Lucia, the Caribbean

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<sup>3</sup> Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, p. 16.

Almost all of the action in Books One, Two, Six and Seven takes place in St Lucia and on the seas around the island. Most of it takes place in Gros Îlet and in places down the west coast of the island, sometimes identified, sometimes not. The two episodes set elsewhere still allude to the island, Section II/iii where *Omeros* is evoked as memories of the island and Antigone says, as if on the Narrator's behalf, 'I'm tired of America, its time for me to go back/to Greece. I miss my islands', and Chapter XLIV, which allows the Narrator to say that all the Antilles islands are similar, then drift off in a reverie about St Lucia, 'I lived there with every sense./I smelt with my eyes, I could see with my nostrils.'

The village of Gros Îlet is drawn on a human scale. Walcott said of the provincial writer, '[he has] deeper communion with things that metropolitan writers no longer care about, or perhaps cannot care about. and these things are attachments to family, earth and history.'<sup>4</sup> We never learn how large the place is, only that it is small enough for everyone to know everyone else, large enough to have tourist hotels. There is little scene setting information, the village is the people who live there. Walcott allows the reader to imagine the larger scene and offers the human details that make it home. As befits an epic, he manages to imbue such details with significance beyond their immediate importance. The symbolic is never too deeply buried (see Critical Introduction: Symbolism).

Ma Kilman's bar is the oldest in the village (III/ii/1-12), a place where life is unchanged by tourism and Philoctete can sit all day. The shops and the Post Office are small. We have already learned that there is a short iron bridge near Seven Seas'

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<sup>4</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Carl Jacobs, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 4.

house (II/ii/10), so the river is also small. There is a street from Ma Kilman's to the beach, where the fish depot is. There is a lagoon behind the church. It could be one of a hundred places in the islands. Nondescript, but 'home'.

The sort of place that inspires lyricism and nostalgia. It is the smells in particular that the Narrator finds evocative when he longs to return from Trinidad (XLIV/ii and iii). Walcott/the Narrator's exile is partially voluntary, yet he feels trapped in it ('I thought of Helen/as my island lost in the haze, and I was sure/I'd never see her again.' XLIV/i/10-11). In a sense, he is right, for though he is back there by the following chapter, he sees 'that other life going in its 'change for the best'' (XLV/ii/7). He mourns the loss of the crafts, carpentry and fishing, and blames himself for making 'their poverty my paradise' (XLV/ii/18). 'Art is History's nostalgia, it prefers a thatched/roof to a concrete factory' (XLV/ii/14-15).

Walcott's exile is also a consequence of his birth and education as a middle-class St Lucian and the divide between the illiterate poor and his own class on the island. He wrote, 'This society is still patterned on the stratification between rich and poor black. He who has acquired education finds himself on the thin line of the split in society [...] The more sophisticated he becomes, the more alienated is his mental state.'<sup>5</sup> He feels drawn to the poor blacks, whose vitality is an asset to him as a writer, but can never be one of them.

Gros Îlet, then, is both the setting for most of the action in the three stories of Achille, Plunkett and Philoctete, and the locus and driving force for the nostalgia and

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<sup>5</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Sharon Ciccarelli, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 39.

homesickness that permeate the fourth story, that of the Narrator, Walcott himself. It is also a metaphor for the crisis of identity facing the islanders as the pressures of mass tourism and commercial exploitation of resources build. St Lucia must change but may lose what is good about it in the process. The same is true of Gros Îlet and the people who live there.

Hector is destroyed by change, Achille survives, for the moment, but his livelihood is under attack, Helen adapts and remains intact because of her inner strength, Plunkett and Philoctete are largely insulated from external change and manage personal growth through understanding their situations. However, it is the Narrator's story that exemplifies best the island's 'in-between' status. The island is not wholly African nor wholly wrapped in its French or British colonialist colours, nor is it fully integrated into the American sphere of influence. It is in the process of becoming somewhere different to what it has been. What that somewhere will be is a matter that concerns Walcott greatly. He wrote, 'Decimation from the Aruac downwards is the blasted root of Antillean history, and the benign blight that is tourism can infect all those island nations, not gradually, but with imperceptible speed, until each rock is whitened by the guano of white-winged hotels, the arc and descent of progress.'<sup>6</sup>

The search for identity is a common theme with West Indian writers concerned with the divided consciousness which arises from the history of slavery, colonialism and miscegenation. We know from King that St Lucia had in Walcott's youth been 'a colonial society where 'shade' influenced social position', 'still feudal, ruled by the white estate owners and the Church' and that the 'Walcotts were part of an English-

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<sup>6</sup> Derek Walcott, 'The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory', p. 82.



speaking high-brown elite in a society in which education, colour, position, property, propriety, and family counted.’ It was a place that the ambitious poor or the jobless needed to leave. Statics goes to Florida for the orange picking (XX/iii/9), rather as a young Dunstan St Omer went to Curaçao to work in the oil industry.<sup>7</sup>

Some of the differences and deferences of such a society come out in *Omeros*: the instinctive privilege accorded the white man, Plunkett, which he neither seeks nor wants (LIV/i/5), the white employers with their black workers, the racial edge to some of the black/white interaction, such as Hector’s cursing of Plunkett as ‘honky’ (LI/i/5), quickly amended when he was recognised. The religious divide between Catholic and Methodist is still there (LIII/i/6-8), but the Narrator longs for an end to the vestiges of colonialism: ‘O Christ! I swore, I’m tired of their fucking guilt,/and our fucking envy!’ (LIV/i/15-16) and there is none of the brown-on-black snobbery of Walcott’s childhood. His St Lucia in *Omeros* is not classless, but because the actors are almost all from the labouring/fishing class, hierarchy is not brought out. Even Plunkett is accepted into the community.

In some respects an idyll, it is still poor and faces destruction because of its catastrophic beauty. Ismond has commented on the importance to Walcott and his generation of writers of geography: ‘it is in Walcott and Harris that it gains special prominence as an integral component of culture.’<sup>8</sup> Tourism, here as elsewhere, is destroying both the landscape and the culture it seeks to enjoy, and the village is complicit: ‘the village did not seem to care//that it was dying in its change, the way it whored/away a simple life that would soon disappear’ (XXI/i/17-18). There is a

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<sup>7</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, pp.12-13 and 28.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Ismond, ‘Landscape as Possibility: Derek Walcott’s ‘Guyana’’ (*Agenda Vol. 39. Nos. 1-3, Winter 2002-2003*), p. 238.

paradox here. St Lucia is where Walcott would have Achille and Philoctete establish their myth of 'home', overcoming their post-colonial sense of displacement with a love for where they were born. It is also the place which the Narrator identifies as 'home', from which he feels exiled, and where Plunkett chooses to make his home. However, it is changing into a place none of them might choose to call 'home', had they any other choice.

Their reactions to this form a main theme of their stories. Achille resents and resists change, Philoctete adapts but keeps his soul, Plunkett asserts his belonging and separateness from tourism. The Narrator, the 'smart man' (LXIV/ii/16) who escaped and who might have been expected to understand best the need for change, has first to purge himself of mistaken visions of the island, as a metaphor for another place and time, and as a paradise of picturesque poverty. Only then can he truly come home.

### 3.3 Africa

It is not easy for Achille and Philoctete to accept St Lucia as home. Their sense of displacement is strong and they need to understand who they are. Philoctete is cured by a mystical baptism involving an African herb. It is Achille who makes the dream journey back to Africa itself.

The Africa he visits is at first presented with the same disconnection as Warwick's reliance on *The World's Classics*. 'It was like the African movies/he had yelped at in childhood' (XXV/i/3) but the scene quickly becomes more real as his (race) memory is awakened: 'And a light inside him wakes,/skipping centuries, ocean and river, and

Time itself.' (XXV/i/10). Like Brathwaite's returner in 'The New Ships', he is welcomed but finds he cannot take up the old way of life, the old identity.<sup>9</sup>

The setting allows Walcott to introduce an ancestor, Afolabe, who helps to question Achille's loss of identity by homing in on his loss of his African name. It also lets him record that this Africa was a community with a history, a tradition and a religion of its own. Achille is torn, unable to be happy in this, his old 'home' while he remembers the sea and his friend Philoctete. Then he realises that some of the tradition is preserved in St Lucia in the Christmas dances. 'The same, the same.' (XXVI/iii/15).

Walcott's final purpose in Achille's African dream is to indict slavery as a black-on-black crime as well as one perpetrated by the white traders. He is able to show this, rather than tell it as a received fact, thereby adding to the truth of it. He shows how the tribes were broken up and men were isolated from their kind, still not in itself the worst crime. The worst is to deprive men of the work they are accustomed to do, their skills. They have lost home, kin, calling and finally now, their names and their languages.

Their only basis for nationhood now is their shared suffering. Walcott has used the African episode to take Achille back to the origin of his pain. Just as Philoctete was able to be reborn through his baptism in the African herb, Achille can now begin his own acceptance of St Lucia as home.

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 124-5.

### 3.4 North America

North America is seen through the Narrator's eyes as a place of unhappy exile and loneliness where colour prejudice is still experienced daily. It is also seen through the eye of History as a place where black slaves were maltreated and murdered and where the native Americans were driven into exile and killed.

It is a metaphor for the falseness of the façade of civilisation and progress, and a dark alternative to the image of St Lucia, which is flooded with light. Its treatment in the book is to provide another viewpoint on the encroaching American influences on St Lucia. The concern Walcott has is as much the moral compass of American society as it is the corrosive commercialisation it exports. The St Lucian school children who frighten Philoctete and torment Seven Seas' dog have an American accent (LXII/iii/4-7). 'Their books are closed' and they have no interest in history. The lizard flees them and Iounalo 'where the iguana is found' is only whispered by the cannon.

Walcott sees America as the new Rome, 'a republic without class//tiered only on wealth, and eaten with prejudice/from its pillared base' [...] 'maintained by convicts and emigrants who had fled/persecution and gave themselves *fascies* with laws/to persecute slaves.' (XLI/i/2-6). The Pilgrim Father, so iconic to white America, pushed back the tepees with his pitchfork and destroyed the forests '[u]ntil the earth lies barren as the dusty Dakotas' (XLI/ii/5-7). The whites deployed 'the first wisdom of Caesar,/to change the ground under the bare soles of a race.' XLI/ii/9).

Walcott is most bitter when dealing with the 19<sup>th</sup> century oppression of the native Americans. The Trail of Tears expulsions from the Southern States in the 1830s (XXXV) and the final destruction of the Plains Indian way of life and the Massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 (XXXV and XLIII) are dealt with at length. Critics have found these elements of the book difficult. Hamner summarises the various responses that 'have seriously questioned the thematic and aesthetic value of broaching the plight of native Americans in a West Indian epic.'<sup>10</sup>

In what might be called the empathy of grief, Walcott is seeing his own loss, his recent breaking up with Norleen Metivier, in Catherine's loss of her son and grief for the Sioux after Wounded Knee. King has referred to the 'autobiographical source of the poem in Walcott's working himself out of the emotional depression caused by the end of his third marriage.'<sup>11</sup> Walcott says in *Omeros*, 'When one grief afflicts us we choose a sharper grief/in hope that enormity will ease affliction,/so Catherine Weldon rose in high relief//through the thin page of a cloud, making a fiction/of my own loss.' (XXXV/iii/12-13). A personal necessity, perhaps, but still not enough to meet critical objections.

Hamner believes the inclusion does have thematic purpose, illustrating historical vestiges of dispossession as part of the story of 'the aboriginals of Africa, North America and the West Indies... the first, most obvious victims of post-Columbian imperialism.'<sup>12</sup> He also points out the autobiographical link with Walcott's time in Boston. These are programmatic and empathetic reasons for the inclusion of the Indian story as an extension of the St Lucian one. In any case, the topic is well-

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<sup>10</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, pp. 92-99.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 519.

<sup>12</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, pp. 94-95.

established with Walcott, its presence traced by Baugh through *The Castaway*, *Sea Grapes*, *The Star-Apple Kingdom* and *The Ghost Dance*.<sup>13</sup> He was unlikely to leave it out of a pan-historic, pan-global work on exile and dislocation.

The sense of dislocation experienced by the West Indian descendants of slaves might seem to many Americans irrelevant, foreign, or a fact of History that calls for no response today. By stressing the parallels with Southern slaves and native Americans, Walcott reinforces the relevance of the West Indies experience to an increasingly enlightened America. In XLIII/ii/1-11 therefore, he has Catherine enact exactly Achille's wandering in the African village after the slave-raid (XXVII/ii/1-6) and the wandering of both Helens (of Troy and St Lucia) among fallen warriors (V/iii/17-18). At the same time, he is saying to the West Indians that their experience is not unique, that they should not feel uniquely victimised.

### 3.5 Europe

The Narrator's journey to Lisbon, London and Dublin, and then across Europe, is more than a crossing of his meridian. It is a journey into the past. The cities of the Old World are places where History matters more than the here-and-now, and a disappointment after the expectations raised by *The World's Classics*. Years earlier, he said to Ned Thomas, 'Maybe Europe, for all its economic vigour – I'm not *saying* it is a dying culture – but maybe it is not the centre of the spirit. The centre of poetry

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Baugh, *Derek Walcott*, p. 147.

need not be in London – it may be in Wales, it may be anywhere else but in that concrete and steel thing.’<sup>14</sup>

In the Caribbean, ‘[w]e think of the past/as better forgotten than fixed with stony regret.’ (XXXVII/iii/5-6), but Lisbon is a place of ‘terrors and terraces’ where clocks spin backwards, statues and ghosts commemorate conquest. The cafés now are empty and fado singers sob, while the city succumbs to doldrum days. It is a place of past energy and present enervation.

London is the home of hypocrisy and pride. Culture, in the figure of Omeros clutching his turned-down Odyssey, is rejected. The city is filthy with grime and the shadows of the exploited colonies are everywhere. The sun has set on its empire. In a retelling of the children’s rhyme Oranges and Lemons, Walcott excoriates the city for its treatment of the colonies and of black immigrants and their descendants. He sees a dark future. Of the British debt to the West Indies, he said, ‘The departure of the British required and still requires a great deal of endeavour, of repairing the psychological damage done by their laziness and their indifference.’<sup>15</sup>

Ireland might have been expected to receive more sympathetic treatment, as a colonised island, but even here he finds ‘a past as old as Glen-da-Lough’s obelisk’ (XXXIX/i/10) and History’s lesson being repeated. It is a place riven by faith, ‘an Ireland no wiser as it got older’ (XXXIX/i/16). Hatred is in the very stones. Even

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<sup>14</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Ned Thomas 1980, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Edward Hirsch 1985, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 107.

when he invokes the Master, Joyce, the mood is nostalgia, the singing that of the Dead in period costume.

The Narrator completes his European tour with a vision of Odysseus, wandering with a black crew in search of home. Istanbul, Venice, the healing power of European art are all dismissed. Walcott finishes with a statement that damns the past, shows that power fades and insists that the celebration of achievement in statuary is meaningless:

Tell that to a slave from the outer regions  
of their fraying empires, what power lay in the work  
of forgiving fountains with naiads and lions. (XL/iii/11)

The odyssey he has undertaken at his father's ghostly behest ('before you return, you must enter cities/that open like *The World's Classics*' (XXXVI/iii/14)) has shown him clearly what was hidden from his father, who never travelled so far. The 'homes' Warwick longed for and where he had expected to find the greatness of History, homes Walcott too had adopted through his readings of European and American literature, are not what they seemed. Walcott needed to make the journeys in order to realise this and recognise that his true home was in the Caribbean, rather as Achille does with Gros Îlet. He will be able now to 'cherish our island for its green simplicities' (XXXVI/iii/20).



## 4. Metaphor and Paronomasia

*Alive with what's invisible*

### 4.1 Metaphor

Walcott commented that metaphor was not a symbol but conversation in the islands, and that the way in which Creole uses metaphors in terms such as *ciseau-la-mer* (*scissor of the sea* for frigate bird) is ‘almost calligraphic. It is a little extravagant naming’.<sup>1</sup> Equally, his use of metaphor is a consequence of his artist eye and perhaps of his polyglot nature. He combines the visual and verbal in a form of ‘psychological synaesthesia’ which Beaujour, quoted by Terada, attributes to polyglot writers.<sup>2</sup> He could hardly not be drawn to metaphor.

It is additionally significant for Walcott because he sees metaphor as conditioning both the thinking of the islanders and the developed world’s attitude towards the islands. As Ismond puts it, ‘in his dialectical, counter-discursive engagement with the colonizer’s mainstream tradition of metaphors, he targets head-on the epic-heroic and cumulative muse of history enshrined in these metaphors [...] the search for fresh metaphors from his newer, different ground – is the search for an alternative, “another light” of humanist intelligence.’<sup>3</sup> Thieme points out that metaphor, being the language of transformation, gains in importance in Walcott’s later poetry.<sup>4</sup> He has been criticised for his excess of metaphor and allegory. However, Breslin has

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Walcott interviewed by Edward Hirsch (1977), republished in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott’s Poetry: American Mimicry* (Boston: Northeastern University Press 1992), p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Ismond, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors: The Caribbean Phase of Derek Walcott’s Poetry* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> John Thieme, *Derek Walcott* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 85.

commented that ‘Walcott’s greatest weakness, his tendency to pile metaphor upon metaphor, image upon image, is inseparable from his greatest strength: his curiously fluid, metamorphic handling of figurative language.’<sup>5</sup>

Metaphors imply comparison and a comparison made on ‘developed world’ terms will always be at the expense of the ‘developing world.’ Walcott sees the derogatory quality of many of the epithets that derive from the old metaphors. Those associated with slavery or colony are obviously so, those of the ‘tourist Eden’ more subtly: *carefree* = shiftless, *unspoilt* = backward, *simple* = photogenic poverty. Even more perniciously, the last of these suggests that progress may ‘spoil’ Eden. Metaphors in his epic, language itself, are weapons and he seeks a new way of describing the island that will serve the fight for self-pride; ‘The epic experience of the race is compressed in metaphor.’<sup>6</sup>

Walcott engaged with metaphors in this way in *Another Life*, believing that the muse of any tradition and its expression are the motive that drives its history. At the same time, he was striving for Hemingway’s clarity, ‘the peeled ease of Hemingway’s early prose’ (*Another Life* 1751). The two were in tension and while his linguistic instinct was towards clarity, his perceptions were metaphorical. Baugh and Nepaulsingh comment that ‘Any plainness, any lucidity he achieves must be qualified by an increasing subtlety and centrality of metaphorical language. It is a question not just of a style of writing, but of a way of seeing life.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Breslin, ‘Toward a Just Evaluation of Walcott’ (*Agenda* Vol. 39. Nos. 1-3, Winter 2002-2003), p. 182.

<sup>6</sup> Derek Walcott, ‘The Muse of History’ in *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh, *Derek Walcott, Another Life: fully annotated*, p. 204.

So, when he argues in *Omeros* for a language beyond metaphor, he cannot intend to do without metaphor altogether. What did he mean then by his line, ‘when would I enter that light beyond metaphor?’ (LIV/iii/4).

A light (i.e. a way of seeing, of describing) beyond metaphor must surely be imagery that is literal, conveying an experience completely, but using language that is as direct as possible. Like Aimé Césaire, who wrote, in *Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal*, ‘I would rediscover the secret of great communications and of great combustions. I would say storm. I would say river. I would say tornado. I would say leaf, I would say tree.’<sup>8</sup>, Walcott tries writing directly (his early model Ezra Pound’s ideal of narrative that sticks to words as simple as dog, horse, sunset):

But it was mine to make what I wanted of it, or  
what I thought was wanted. A cool wood off the road,  
a hut closed like a wound, and the sound of a river  
  
coming through the trees on a country Saturday,  
with no one in the dry front yard, the still leaves,  
the yard, the shade of a breadfruit tree on the door,  
  
then the track from which a man’s figure emerges,  
then a girl carrying laundry, the road-smell like loaves,  
the yellow-dressed butterflies in the grass margins. (LIV/iii/5-7)

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<sup>8</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal*, translated by Mireille Rosello with Annie Pritchard (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 1995), p. 87.

However, even here Walcott is unable to exclude a metaphor ('yellow-dressed butterflies'), a simile or two ('a hut closed like a wound', 'road-smell like loaves') and a pun ('marges' where 'verges' would have done as well and would have been a closer rhyme with 'emerges', but would have lacked the punning link back to the 'butter' in 'butterflies' and to 'loaves'). As I. A. Richards observed, 'our pretence to do without metaphor is never more than a bluff waiting to be called.'<sup>9</sup>

For Walcott the figurate world is a world of metaphor because the actual world he perceives is made of metaphor. His concern is to try 'to hear the names of things and people in their own context, meaning everything named in a noun and everything around a name. You see maybe the whole West Indian experience is not itself – it is translated. There is a film over the name, Caribbean...It is the origin of the real Caribbean nouns that I'm after.'<sup>10</sup>

Ismond sees Walcott's engagement with naming as complex and novel, comprising the discovery of fresh metaphors, but 'within a questioning, quarrelling engagement with the colonizer's tradition', and combined with a fresh recovery of archetypes. She traces this onward through the process of language generation to the 'wider, overarching goal of indigenizing, naturalizing the given language in his art.'<sup>11</sup> This is a revolutionary effort.

His method is a metaphoric naming of the St Lucian landscape and inhabitants as they are, with an Adamic eye, everything still to be discovered and achieved. In doing so,

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<sup>9</sup> I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford, London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), p 92.

<sup>10</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J. P. White 1990, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 173.

<sup>11</sup> Patricia Ismond, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors*, pp. 56-7.

he seeks to move beyond a metaphor that has its roots in Western thought and experience. As he put it, 'between me and that noun there is already a history of the noun and therefore associations and references of that noun that I cannot get to.'<sup>12</sup> Livingstone wrote, 'what finally delivers [Walcott] from colonial servitude into independent consciousness, is the forging of a language that goes beyond mimicry to an elemental naming of things with epiphanic power.'<sup>13</sup> Walcott again, 'I learned what a noun is, writing this book. No one is Adam. A noun is not a name you give something. It is something you watch becoming itself, and you have to have the patience to find out what it is.'<sup>14</sup>

What is it about Walcott's 'eye' that allows him to see in this way? Ramazani comments on his 'prodigious passion for likeness'<sup>15</sup> and it is striking how often those likenesses are visual. Walcott's talent as a painter developed early and he was studying reproductions of Western art at the same time as he read deeply into the canon of Western literature. Though he yielded the painter's place to Dunstan St Omer and chose to be the writer in their geminal pact<sup>16</sup>, he neither abandoned painting nor lost his way of seeing 'the intimacy of an object'.<sup>17</sup> Consistently with his admiration of Hemingway's style, Walcott admired Magritte among the surrealists for

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<sup>12</sup> Derek Walcott, 'Reflections on *Omeros*' ed. by Gregson Davis, p. 234.

<sup>13</sup> James Livingstone, *Derek Walcott: Poet of the New World* (Paper delivered at the annual conference of the National Council of Teachers of English, Las Vegas, Nevada, 26 November 1971), p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Derek Walcott, *New York Times* 9 October 1990 C 13, quoted by Gregson Davis, '“With No Homeric Shadow” : The Disavowal of Epic in *Omeros*', p. 333.

<sup>15</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse*, p. 69.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh, *Derek Walcott, Another Life, fully annotated*, lines 1183-1198.

<sup>17</sup> Derek Walcott interviewed by Dennis Scott, *Caribbean Quarterly Vol 14, No 1 and 2*, 1968, republished in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 11.

his 'exact dreaming, detailed reverie' rather than Dali's rhetoric or Chirico's languid perspectives. 'Magritte is tougher in terms of precision'.<sup>18</sup>

His language attempts a precision and intimacy with the object world that visual art may find comes more naturally. Walcott commented on the visual, 'It's a way of looking, you know, a concentration that is calmer'.<sup>19</sup> Terada said, 'He does not separate the visual from the verbal art but places both on a spectrum'.<sup>20</sup>

Ismond has discussed the development of metaphor in his earlier, Caribbean phase of writing and characterises his counter-discourse with the European tradition as 'complex, many-sided, and finally eclectic.' She selects as prominent his sea metaphors (the Atlantic as the amnesiac Middle Passage with its loss of Africa, the Caribbean as the collective unconscious in the region, with its submerged terrors, and the sea generally as history, the locus of the intersection of the temporal/empirical and the timeless, the simultaneity of endings and beginnings). She also speaks of the mythologizing of the rustic Trinidadian village of Rampanalgas.<sup>21</sup>

All this remains in *Omeros*, not least in the treatment of Gros Îlet, but the sea metaphors have developed further. There is much incidental detail (the surf as lace, the many fishing images) but the underlying image is of the sea as nurturing mother, and as garden, both interpretations heavy with symbolism. There are darker images too, where the sea is a place of the underworld and the dead of the Middle Passage.

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<sup>18</sup> Derek Walcott, classroom remarks Boston 1988 noted by William Keeney and quoted by Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry*, p. 125.

<sup>19</sup> Derek Walcott interviewed by Dennis Scott, *Caribbean Quarterly Vol 14, No 1 and 2*, 1968, republished in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry*, p. 127.

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Ismond, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors*, pp. 13-16 and ff.

Above all, the sea represents continuity and the familiar. It is ever-present in the story and much of the action takes place on it or at its margin.

The success of a metaphor depends not so much on its initial appeal as on the extent to which it penetrates the truth. Walcott shows the islanders diving and fighting for pennies among the expensive garbage spewed by the engines of the cruise liner, then speaks of the liner leaving the island in its wash ‘and the black waves/settle down to their own level’ (XIII/ii/5-10). The metaphor grows out of the situation (it might just be speaking about the waves of the ship’s wake) and is not imposed upon it, seeming more true as a result. The white tourists do not expect the blacks to do more than stay where they are, at a level lower than the rest of the (developed) world and accepting what is tossed to them. The economy, accuracy and completeness of the statement are matched by its appropriateness to the story.

It is noticeable how Walcott uses local imagery from the opening of the poem. Throughout Chapter I he uses the axe, the mist, a conch, a sea-urchin, ripening pods, a shark, mackerel, a nest, horns, and many more such, together with various water and fishing images, to build his metaphors and similes. Two of the only three places where he looks to Europe for his imagery are the Biblical reference to ‘pillars that fell’ (I/i/16) and the ‘muskets of cracking logs’ (I/ii/12). In both cases, he is referring to the fatal effect of European missionaries and soldiers on the traditional ways. The one other image that is European is where the fishermen are ‘Like barbarians striding columns they have brought down’ (I/ii/8), and Walcott is explicit about the barbarism being wrought.

It is informative to compare this with the final chapter of the book. The same primacy of the natural image is found, with European ones intruding but this time only to be neutralised. So, the 'pyramid' of the Narrator's imagined grave is 'unpharaonic' (LXIV/i/9), Helen's 'profile on a shield' is immediately balanced with a Caribbean 'sinuous neck/longing like a palm's' (LXIV/ii/5-6), the Greek myths are mentioned but 'never' happened here (LXIV/ii/9-11), the Cyclops was in 'stories/we recited as children' (LXIV/ii/16-17) and when, in the final section, Achille is referred to metaphorically as 'A triumphant Achilles', he is killing fish not warriors (LXIV/iii/4).

In the course of the book, Walcott demonstrates his tendency to use classical metaphors then cures himself of it. This is itself a metaphor for the idea that while colonial education under the British had qualities, it also carried a way of looking at the world that conditioned the West Indies to peripheral status, remote from the centre of power. Walcott had been criticised for being too European in his thinking but a close reading of his work shows that he adopted a balanced position early on.

## 4.2 Paronomasia

The last Greek image in the poem has 'aching Achilles' washing sand from his heels. (LXIV/iii/8). The pun of 'aching' for 'Achaean' tells us that this is Greek Achilles leaving, showing us a clean pair of heels. St Lucian Achille is able to emerge as his Creole self in the next, macaronic pun on the French for 'armpit', *aisselle* (LXIV/iii/9).



In its recognition and exploitation of similarity in order to expand meaning, paronomasia is related to metaphor and deserves to be discussed here. Walcott's use of puns is in keeping with the masters he follows (Dante, Homer and Joyce all use them) but also follows folk culture in the Caribbean where word-play in its various forms is valued, and where, as Walcott said, 'the ritualistic thing in Calypso is comic in its drive, even if you have a tragic content.'<sup>22</sup>

His liking for them may have been encouraged as a result of reading Tom Swift stories where puns were frequent (see note to XIX/ii/4 in the Annotations). He says (of Plunkett, but self-referentially) 'he punned relentlessly' (V/iii/8) and he took great delight in them. Laurence Goldstraw, a member of his Trinidad Theatre Workshop for 10 years, wrote of this, 'Walcott is, of course, a great punster, and equivocal lines appear in all his plays. Derek never forgets any of them, and roars with laughter each time they make an appearance, no matter how venerable these puns and jokes may be.'<sup>23</sup>

Burnett finds that 'the virtuosity of the puns leads to the philosophical reflection that if language can bring two separate terms together creatively, then perhaps racially divided people can be brought together by art.'<sup>24</sup> Walcott's very choice of title is laden with puns, whichever language you speak. 'Omeros' is broken down by him into three punning terms in II/iii/4, with 'O' the conch-blast announcing a sail coming in and an invocation of the muse, 'mer' being sea and mother, both sustaining the islanders, and 'os' being both a bone and the sound of the surf, mortality and eternity.

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<sup>22</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J. P. White 1990, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 171.

<sup>23</sup> Laurence Goldstraw, *Reminiscences of Derek Walcott and the Trinidad Theatre Workshop*, printed in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, p. 275.

<sup>24</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott; Politics and Poetics*, p. 151

‘Homer’ is both the master, to whom the poet looks for inspiration and model, and one who seeks to return home, the poet himself. Between them, the two versions of the name manage to allude to much of the essence of the book.

With Walcott, the pun is often as much metaphorical as humorous, an attempt to draw attention to and enrich meaning. He wants every word to carry as much freight as possible and our initial amusement is followed by thoughtful reflection.

So, when Maud thinks of ‘the velocity of passenger transports on/uncurbed highway’ (X/iii/12), we understand both the primitive condition of the roads and the reckless nature of the driving. A line or two earlier, in ‘Turbanned religious cranks/urging sisters with candles to the joy of sects’ we hear implied disapproval of gurus who exploit for both monetary and sexual reasons, but also, through the hidden reference to the 1972 sex manual by Alex Comfort,<sup>25</sup> something of Maud’s own repression or longing for a better sex life.

When the betrayal of the North American Indian (XXXV/iii/4) is satirised as ‘the white peace of paper so ornately signed’ there is a telling tripling of the homophone *peace/piece*’s meaning: the peace was a white one, not even-handed or benefiting the Indian, and it existed only on paper, not on the ground, and it was as insubstantial as a piece of paper. The adverb ‘ornately’ also carries echoes of ‘*elaborate, over-embellished*’ which in turn suggest the peace was a lie, and ‘signed’ is another pun, containing the sense of ‘*a gesture*’, a formality that is not meant.

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<sup>25</sup> Dr Alex Comfort, *The Joy of Sex* (London: Mitchell Beazley 1972)

There are over 200 puns in the poem, approaching one per page. They range from the uncomplicated ('poking around the pigs' (XVIII/ii/7)) to the parametaphorical ('whirred by the swift's flywheel into open ocean' (XXIV/iii/9)). In some, the layers of meaning go three- and four-deep and are so subtle the pun may be missed at a casual reading.

## 5. Symbolism

### *The zig-zag hieroglyph*

#### 5.1 The Risk of Allegory

King records that as early as 1949, the *Caribbean Quarterly* pointed out in an explication of *The Yellow Cemetery* how Walcott relied on ‘the reader’s response to colours, suggestions, and associations and not solely to the sense of the words.’

Images carry meanings and there are many symbols in the background.<sup>1</sup>

He has since developed a language of symbols that, through repeated appearance in successive works, have built up layers of association. Some symbols are personal to him, some have universal meaning, but even the latter are taken over and developed into something individual to his way of seeing the world and his purpose for the Caribbean.

In 1986, reviewing his *Collected Poems 1948-1984* for *The New York Times*, Dickey warned against ‘a chronic inability to state, or see, things without allegory’, but went on to praise Walcott’s ‘fearless language’, his ability to break through ‘into a highly colored (sic), pulsating realm of his own.’<sup>2</sup> Walcott seems to have heard that warning. He complains, ‘All that Greek manure under the green bananas/under the indigo hills the rain-rutted road,/the galvanized village, the myth of rustic manners [...] when would I not hear the Trojan War/in two fishermen cursing in Ma Kilman’s shop? [...] when would I enter that light beyond metaphor?’ (LIV/iii/1-4).

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> James Dickey, *The Worlds of a Cosmic Castaway*  
<<http://www.times.com/books/98/08/30/specials/dickey-walcott.html>> (accessed 11 Jan 2010)

He commented to Fumagalli, 'this is the danger for the Caribbean writer – to presume that it is his duty to make emblems or epitaphs out of people'<sup>3</sup>. He also saw the danger in having too many symbols. He said, 'To me, *Moby Dick* seems so overloaded with symbols, the freight is too much.'<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Walcott remains committed to the allegorical. Though his metaphors are new they are still metaphors and frequent, nor can he do without symbols. He may seek to see the islanders as they are and without the myth, but, just as metaphor is unavoidable, symbols are too important to be abandoned altogether.

## 5.2 The Iguana

The iguana is both a symbol bearing meaning and a heraldic beast. It represents the island, once called Iouanalao, 'where the iguana is found' (I/i/13). It not only gave the island its Aruac name but in its hunched shape and ridged back it reflects the shape of the island. Like the island, it takes its own time, 'its deliberate tail/moving with the island. The slit pods of its eyes/ripened in a pause that lasted for centuries' (I/i/13-15). Symbolically, Burnett points to it representing the pre-Columbian past and the native Americans and the innocent timelessness of nature.<sup>5</sup> Walcott will have known that, again like the island, the St Lucian iguana population is threatened by development, 'rarely seen in the wild, even in the core of their suggested range. Extensive wildlife studies in these areas have failed to find evidence of iguanas.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, p. 282.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J. P. White 1990, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 161.

<sup>5</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott, Politics and Poetics*, p. 113

<sup>6</sup> West Indian Iguana Specialist Group Newsletter Vol 2, No 2 (Fall 1999)  
<<http://www.iucn-isg.org/newsletters/f1999v2n2.php>> [accessed 12 Jan 2010]

### 5.3 The Island

As the iguana represents the island, the island represents the female, the desired.<sup>7</sup>

Walcott conflates the imagery of island and woman repeatedly: 'I saw how the surf printed its lace in patterns/on the shore of her neck, then the lowering shallows/of silk swirled at her ankles, like surf without noise' (II/iii/8), 'she lay as calm as a port' (II/iii/13), 'the island was Helen' (XIX/iii/7), 'down the deep ravine of her shoulders' (XXI/iii/1), 'with the Pitons/for breasts' (LXII/ii/4) etc.

Burnett registers this and goes on to make the point that the island, knowable as a larger country might not be, is symbolised as female because of other resonances, those of nurture, of returning home. This may also be because of masculine trauma and alienation, and she cites Lloyd Brown on the island identity 'being rooted in the paradox of a cherished separateness and a strong need to merge with the other'.<sup>8</sup>

### 5.4 The Sea

At a personal level, Walcott has said that the sea is one of those things that for him present the strength and pull of longing, reminding of childhood.<sup>9</sup> In his etymology of the name *Omeros*, Walcott says '*mer* was/both mother and sea in our Antillean patois' (II/iii/4) and is making more than the linguistic point. The 'sea that feed us/fishermen all our life' (I/i/3) is their mother.

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<sup>7</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott, Politics and Poetics*, p. 309.

<sup>8</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott, Politics and Poetics*, p. 45 and citing Lloyd Brown, *West Indian Poetry* (London, Heinemann, 1984) p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Nancy Schoenberger 1983, *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 87.

The sea is the ever-present symbol in Walcott's work. It represents connection between the islands ('our wide country' (LXIV/i/4) - Walcott's federalist instinct) and between the islands and the Old World (Walcott's ancestral links). At the same time, by erasing traces in the sand it enacts the Caribbean opportunity to make new. Walcott saw in it 'the erasure of the idea of history. To me, there are always images of erasure in the Caribbean – in the surf which continually wipes the sand clean, in the fact that those huge clouds change so quickly'.<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere he said, 'The strength of the sea gives you an idea of time that makes history absurd. Because history is an intrusion on that immensity. History is a very, very minor statement...an insignificant speck on the rim of that horizon.'<sup>11</sup>

In *Another Life*, he writes, 'the crossing of water has erased their memories,/And the sea, which is always the same,/accepts them' (lines 3402-4). Here, the sea is both the source of their suffering, distancing them from their origins, and the cure for that suffering, because it represents continuity. Breslin sees this as acceptance of them as creatures and of their memories, which are transferred to the eternal present of the sea and the shore.<sup>12</sup> *Omeros* ends, 'When he left the beach, the sea was still going on' (LXIV/iii/11).

Breslin later points to the direct identification of the sea with poetry. Not only is Seven Seas/Homer so named, but the Narrator also says 'I have always heard/your

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<sup>10</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Edward Hirsch, *The Art of Poetry XXXVII: Derek Walcott* (*The Paris Review*, 101 (Winter 1986), pp. 196-230, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, ed. William Baer, p. 108.

<sup>11</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J. P. White 1990, *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 158.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, p. 186.

voice in that sea, master' (LVI/iii/8).<sup>13</sup> The ocean 'was an epic where every line was erased//yet freshly written in sheets of exploding surf' (LIX/i/12-13). 'It never altered its metre/to suit the age, a wide page without metaphors./Our last resort as much as yours, Omeros.' (LIX/i/15).

## 5.5 The Sunrise

Just as the sea is still there at the end of the poem, sunrise is there at the beginning, 'This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes' (I/i/1). Sunrise holds personal significance, it is the hour at which Walcott enjoys working best: 'I guess I would say...the early dark and the sunrise...and with whatever you are working on, is a very ritualistic thing. I'd go even further and say it's a religious thing.'<sup>14</sup> The first five chapters of the book are about the rites of morning.

It represents creation, renewal and opportunity. He sees a parallel between his personal grasping of this and the Caribbean situation. The sun will rise each day on another chance to put history behind them and begin anew.

## 5.6 The Dog

In Walcott's 1988 collection *The Arkansas Testament*, the dog appeared in the poem 'Cul de Sac Valley' as 'a mongrel,/a black vowel barking' and later in the same poem becomes the hill echoing its name that 'yelping happily, repeats/vowel after vowel'.

Also in the same volume, in the poem 'The Arkansas Testament', light races towards

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, pp. 268-9.

<sup>14</sup> Derek Walcott, in conversation with Edward Hirsch, *The Art of Poetry XXXVII*, *The Paris Review* 1985, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, ed. by William Baer, p. 101.



Walcott 'like a mongrel/hoping that it would be caressed.' At this stage, the dog is a metaphor for both language and light, and its significance as a mongrel seems only that it is a lively animal.<sup>15</sup>

When it appears in *Omeros*, it has gained significance in a way that will carry forward ten years later into *Tiepolo's Hound*. In *Omeros*, it is Seven Seas/Homer's dog, begging to be let in (II/ii/4 and 12). It is black at first and has no name (XXXI/ii/3 and 10) but later it has become a khaki dog (LVI/i/3) that whines with joy when Seven Seas/Homer appears from the surf (LVI/i/9). We can see in the dog first the nameless black slave and generations later the mulatto Walcott, the Homer enthusiast. When Homer tells the dog 'Home!' (LVII/i/3) it can be read as a statement ('This is home') as much as a dismissal and the dog goes only as far as the nearby sea-almonds.

## 5.7 The Wound

The wound and its healing are a major trope in the poem. Each of the main characters has a wound, and, in the volcanic Soufrière, so does the island itself. Walcott/the Narrator shares a wound with Philoctete (their search for roots), Plunkett has an old head-wound and loses his wife, Maud suffers homesickness and death from cancer, Achille suffers a heel-prick and jealousy and loss of his love, Hector suffers from jealousy and eventually dies from his attempt to keep Helen with money. Helen herself suffers a 'hole in her heart' from her abandonment of Achille, but she represents the island and is therefore strong, the bearer of a future that may belong to

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<sup>15</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Arkansas Testament* (London, Faber and Faber, 1988), pp 10, 14 and 110

Achille, the slow traditionalist, or Hector, the money-obsessed go-getter. Even the flower from Africa that will eventually cure Philoctete has a wound, or maybe is a wound (XLVIII/ii/6).

The significance of the wound is that all West Indians of African slave descent share a loss of name, history and language, and therefore of identity. This wound must be cured if they are to be freed to reach their potential. Walcott extends this need to mend what is broken in their history to others in the Caribbean, including the Indian indentured labourers, the Muslims, the Chinese, the Jews.<sup>16</sup> Even the ex-colonialists who are themselves cut off from their ancestral roots. Breslin sees complementary opposites in Plunkett, with his head wound and mostly psychological pain, and Philoctete, with his shin wound and mostly physical pain. 'In Achille, Philoctete and Hector, we see the historical wound as it afflicts the descendants of slaves; in Dennis Plunkett, we see its less obvious corrosion in the descendants of masters.'<sup>17</sup> Ramazani adds to this Achille, Hector, Helen, and Plunkett suffering the more immediate wound of love. In a masterly analysis of the significance of the wound, he stresses its 'profoundly intercultural character'. He points to the many parallels between Philoctete and Plunkett and says that Walcott has devised 'a transnational allegory about both the wound of black St Lucian history and a larger subject – what he calls "the incurable//wound of time".'<sup>18</sup>

In *Omeros*, the healing comes in various ways that together spell out Walcott's vision for the West Indies. Ma Kilman heals Philoctete (the first to display his wound and the first to be cured) with an African herb that has successfully transplanted to the

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<sup>16</sup> Derek Walcott, 'The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory', in *What the Twilight Says*, p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, pp. 252-3.

<sup>18</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse*, pp. 51-71

Caribbean (XLIX/i), Plunkett is healed by learning how to take life as it comes, day by day, forgetting history (LXI/iii), Walcott/the Narrator is healed by giving up his classical Greek love and seeing the self-healing island clearly, as it is, drying after rain, after tears (XLIX/iii).

Maud dies consoled by the tune she used to play, 'Bendemeer's Stream', whose lyric speaks of the exile's memory of a loved place (LI/iii). Hector is saved by his death, for he had abandoned the sea and was being corrupted and made unhappy by his money-making life. 'A man who cursed the sea had cursed his own mother.' (XLV/iii), and he dies forgiven by his Madonna (XLV/i). Achille is healed by realising there is no place like his own village, his own woman (LX/i) and by seeing God in a near-death encounter with the power of nature and the sea (LX/iii).

Breslin sees all of the healings involving some reconciliation of the present/future with the past and discusses the connections between healing and memory.<sup>19</sup>

## 5.8 The Swift

The sea-swift is a recurrent symbol in the poem, not just appearing but initiating action. Pollard has Walcott finding the image of the swift by chance, citing Bruckner about a pamphlet of Caribbean birds Walcott said he was given by a friend.<sup>20</sup>

However, the swift's shuttling flight appears as early as 1969 in *Ebb*: 'a dark aisle/of fountaining, gold coconuts.../....as we file/through its swift-wickered shade' and it is

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, pp. 253-61.

<sup>20</sup> Charles W. Pollard, *New World Modernisms T S Eliot, Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite*, (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004), p. 184 and D. J. R. Bruckner, *A Poem in Homage to an Unwanted Man*, in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, p. 398.

likely that this particular bird also came to mind naturally from his observation of nature in his younger island days.<sup>21</sup>

Pollard sees it as representing poetic inspiration and Walcott's poetic relationship to the Caribbean experience, citing the passage at LXIII/iii/1, 'I followed a sea-swift to both sides of this text'. He also sees it as representing transcendent blessing on the capacity to create, citing LVIII/ii/11 'the sea-swift was sent to you:/to circle yourself and your island with this art'.<sup>22</sup>

The swift is that and more. It represents Walcott's dualist solution to the binary debate of Euro- or Afro-centrism, for it sews together Europe, Africa and the Americas in its criss-cross flight. It blesses with its cruciform shape Achilles's new canoe (I/ii/1 and 18) and leads his dream-voyage to Africa (XXIV/iii/1-9) in his futile search for his African past. In Homeric terms, though neither owl nor heron it is the spirit of Pallas Athena watching over the islanders. Like the heron in the *Iliad*<sup>23</sup> the swift is often as much heard as seen (IV/ii/1, XXIV/ii/3-4, XXV/i/1, LXIII/ii/10).

It carried the seed of Philoctete's cure from Africa to St Lucia (XLVII/iii/1-9), a cure that became possible because the seed took root where it fell. It gives form to Walcott's belief that by claiming both their African and European inheritances and accepting their new land as home, West Indians can make a future that will renew the Old World. Finally, as Burnett indicates, it heals the wound that West Indians bear as

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<sup>21</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Gulf and Other Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape 1969), p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Charles W. Pollard, *New World Modernisms*, p. 184.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Hammond, translator, *Homer's Iliad* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 158.

a result of slavery, 'she sewed the Atlantic rift with a needle's line,/the rift in the soul'  
(LXIII/iii/4).<sup>24</sup>

## 5.9 Sewing

The previous image combines the swift with another of Walcott's personal symbols, sewing. His widowed mother Alix, schoolteacher by day, sewed at night to earn extra money, her customers the elite and her wealthier neighbours. She also made costumes for the children's carnival.<sup>25</sup> Her hard work and thrift enabled her to support her sons and later to give Derek money for the printing of his first collections.

George Odum, cited by King, recalled at her death that her position behind the Singer sewing machine 'became the seat of power, authority and comfort in the Walcott household'.<sup>26</sup> For Derek, the activity must have come to mean parental care, healing and the safety of childhood, and he may have compared it with Aimé Césaire's memory of 'the Singer [a make of sewing machine], bitterly biting into the soft flesh of the night as my mother pedals, pedals for our hunger every day, every night'.<sup>27</sup>

In *Omeros*, sewing recurs several times. Ma Kilman sews (III/iii/6), martins at dusk 'sew the silk sky' (XI/iii/3), bats fly with 'crisscrossing stitches' (XLVIII/i/28). One character, Maud Plunkett, spends all her spare time sewing a quilt on which she embroiders St Lucia's many species of birds. At one level of meaning, the Homeric resonance is with Penelope, wife of Odysseus, patient, faithful and waiting for her

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<sup>24</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott, Politics and Poetics*, p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>26</sup> George Odum, 'Alix Walcott – A Catalyst for Genius' (*The Crusader*, 19 May 1990), cited in Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, p. 83.

husband to return to her, while she weaves a shroud for his father (the quilt will in fact drape Maud's bier). At another, the personal resonance is with Walcott's mother.

'There was Plunkett in my father, much as there was/my mother in Maud' (LII/iii/1).

At still another, the resonance is with Walcott himself and writing poetry, an image in which he brings together the swift and sewing: 'the ghosts I will make of you with my scratching pen,/like a needle piercing the ring's embroidery/with a swift's beak' (LIII/ii/8-9).

Maud's quilt has other meanings. It contains all the birds of the islands, including those who have come there from elsewhere and settled: 'They flew from their region,/their bright spurs braceleted with Greek or Latin tags, to pin themselves to the silk' (XVI/ii/7), referring to the coffled slaves with their imposed classical names. LXIV/i/7-8 speaks of Walcott's chirping nib and there are several other points whence it is clear that the birds on the tapestry represent the races and languages of the island. At the same time, it is a parallel for Plunkett's 'ances-tree' (XVI/i/1), its Latin tags matched by the names written in by the genealogist..

### 5.10 The Canoe

The canoe is symbolic of several things. At one level, it represents Walcott's craft, the writing of poetry, and is referred to in this sense in several places. It is mentioned in the Dedication, and in LXIV/ii/12-13 is a metaphor for the task Walcott set himself at the outset, to build a craft 'ribbed in our native timber'. This returns us to the opening line of the poem and we realise that Philoctete could have been speaking both

of Achille's hollowing out of a canoe and Walcott's writing. In this sense, Fumagalli points out that this forging of a poetic language – an Antillean poetic chant – is a necessary step towards the creation of a myth for the islands. Walcott's final chapter: 'I sang of quiet Achille, Afolabe's son/[...] I sang the only slaughter/that brought him delight, and that from necessity -/of fish [...] I sang our wide country, the Caribbean sea' (LXIV/i/1-4) represents for her his honouring of the writer of the *Iliad* and his declaration of independence from him.

In another sense, the canoe represents the traditional ways, Achille clinging to the old way of fishing, while Hector sells his canoe and buys a transport, the modern way to earn a living. Significantly, Hector dies like Icarus and Achille survives to recognise the island as his home and win Helen back. He wants to give Helen's child an African name. Walcott sees the problems both of clinging blindly to tradition and of placing economic progress through tourism over more spiritual values.

### 5.11 The Light

Walcott said, 'the intensity of the blueness of the sea, the richness of the greens and the houses on the hillside, it's like now, it is a continual repetition of an 'is'. It's not a 'was'. [...] [history is] daily erased by the presence of light in the Caribbean and I think that is good.' And later, 'Subliminally, every Caribbean person is venerating light and one light, continually.'<sup>28</sup>

The poem begins with a sunrise and light sometimes seems to take on the role of agent – 'their leaves start shaking/the minute the axe of sunlight hit the cedars' (I/i/2).

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<sup>28</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by David Dabydeen, *Agenda Vol. 39. Nos. 1-3, Winter 2002-2003*, pp. 155-6.

It is constantly referred to as netting or webbing objects. It is a physical thing, liquid, blood – ‘Sunrise/ trickled down its valleys, blood splashed on the cedars/and the grove flooded with the light of sacrifice’ (I/i/20-21). It is sacred and metaphorical, deriving from the Master, Homer – ‘it was your light that startled our sunlit wharves’ (II/ii/21). It is god-like in its indifference to men – ‘sunrise would flood Maud’s garden, pouring/relentless/light’ yet is revelation – ‘When would I enter that light beyond metaphor?’ (LIV/iii/4) and ‘My light was clear’ (LIX/i/1).

Light is the dominant characteristic of the Caribbean, lending its qualities to other iconic aspects like the sea or the forest. For Walcott the painter it is life and potential, renewed each sunrise.

## 5.12 The Garden

Gardens represent the place where a person’s spirit can emerge and be itself. So, Philoctete has his yam garden and it is there that he faces his inner agony and finds the strength to bear it patiently (IV/i/12-13 and IV/ii/6-7). Maud has her orchid garden. She prefers gardens to empires (L/iii/9) and when she is tired of the garden (LI/iii/7) she is dying. Achille has the sea – ‘He was at home./This was his garden.’ (XXIV/i/6-7) Helen is destructive in Maud’s garden(XXIII/iii/7-9). In Seven Seas’ yard, it is History that Achille discovers and rejects (XXXI/ii). The significance of a garden lies partly in the idea of ‘home’, a place of security to which you return, and partly in the symbolism of Eden and growth. It is a place of mythic potential where the spirit is healed.



There are other symbols too many to examine here, Walcott's relationship to nature: the trees and the gods, birds and ants (Burnett devotes four pages to the last).<sup>29</sup> Also many symbols connected with seeing: triangles, a vase, columns, shapes generally. Walcott seems to see the thing itself and its meanings simultaneously. His settings are layered universes in which ghosts move behind immanence, past and present coexist and meaning is everywhere.

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<sup>29</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, pp. 164-167.

## 6. Historiography

### *The carved stone*

### 6.1 The Rejection of History

Walcott has written often on the subject of history and its importance or unimportance to the West Indies. In 'The Muse of History', he has anatomised the reactions and motivations of the resisters and the embracers of history, the anthropologists who turn to forgotten gods, the vengeful and the ashamed, the exiles, the romantics and the revolutionaries. He insists that great poets adopt none of these positions, that the tribe requires of them the highest language and more than predictable sentiments. He gives 'strange and bitter yet ennobling thanks' to both of his bloodlines for 'the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds' and for placing him in the wonder of an Eden, exiled though they were from theirs.

Like the great poets (from Whitman to Neruda), his 'vision of Man in the New World is Adamic', someone 'still capable of enormous wonder', someone who has 'paid his accounts to Greece and Rome and walks in a world without monuments or ruins.' St.-John Perse glorifies 'not veneration but the perennial freedom.' His poems 'seek spaces where praise of the earth is ancestral.'<sup>1</sup>

The rejection of history as a determining force is central to Walcott's vision of how the Caribbean can counter the inheritances of slavery and find a future beyond guilt, apathy and resentment. It is appropriate then to consider how he has himself treated historical 'fact' (and its doppelgänger, classical myth) in *Omeros*.

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Muse of History* in *What the Twilight Says*, pp. 37-38

## 6.2 Historical Fact

History is myth, of course, from the moment it is written. Ironically, it is this that gives it greater power to determine the future (the 'fact' is past and its consequences may be dealt with, but the myth lives on and affects people's minds now). This causes Walcott concern in his post-colonial project for the Caribbean. How is he to counter the impact on the West Indian psyche of history's centuries of black subjugation and white mastery, when such things have become the stuff of the present-day myth of victimhood and blame?

His method, in *Omeros*, is to dispose of both history and the myths that have grown out of it. He takes the history of slavery and shows it clearly and completely, thereby spreading across white and black both the collective guilt and the collective hurt. Extending chronicity and space, he takes the West Indian reader out of the islands, showing that their subjugation is not unique nor uniquely white-caused, and furthermore that the empires that imposed their suffering no longer have the power to do so.

He shows too that exile is a common condition; Plunkett is an exile, the Sioux are exiles, many islanders (like Statics) are exiles over again, for economic reasons or (like the Narrator) for personal growth. He demonstrates that it was slaves who built what is revered or reviled today as the empire's achievements in the West Indies.

In his wide-ranging travels through world history, Walcott includes allusions to black slavery in the USA and, more controversially, the episodes of the Ghost Dance and the Trail of Tears. The case for their inclusion is touched on in Settings: North America above. Here, it is interesting to see how he has chosen to use these episodes.

There is no sequential chronicle of historical facts, chronicity is unimportant. The Ghost Dance, the disregarded treaties, the expulsions and Manifest Destiny are almost seen as simultaneous. Walcott invents or alters aspects of Catherine Weldon's life to provide motivation and opportunity (she lived in Christie (NY), Hoboken or Newark (NJ) and then Brooklyn (NY), not Boston, did not work for Colonel Cody, was not married to Sitting Bull)<sup>2</sup>. He is concerned with virtual truths, emotional facts.

His use of the material, combining it with his personal griefs, spreads the stain of empire to the North American continent. Doing so, he increases the relevance of his West Indian material to the US reader and provides his own people with companions in misfortune. The tone of the passages is oppressive and sombre, a darkness out of which the reader emerges with a sense of relief to the West Indian winter and the fiction of Hector's death.

### 6.3 Classical Myth

In his allusions to Homeric and Virgilian myth, Walcott does not adopt story-lines wholesale. He said, '[critics want] a sort of *Iliad* in blackface. Writers won't do that. What's new about a classic is that it stays new. You have your debts to your

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<sup>2</sup> Eileen Pollack, *Woman Walking Ahead: In Search of Catherine Weldon and Sitting Bull* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), pp. 19, 111 and 165.

predecessors; your acknowledgement is a votive acknowledgement.<sup>3</sup> In *Sea Grapes* he says, 'The classics can console. But not enough.'<sup>4</sup>, writing there of the conflict between calling and family but equally applicable to serving St Lucia's need for a myth of place. A reworking of *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad* or *The Aeneid* would have meant distorting modern St Lucian concerns, characterisations and motivations in order to maintain antique parallels that would have seemed increasingly artificial as the poem unfolded. More importantly, he would have had to adopt the ancient myths themselves, whereas his intent in *Omeros* is to build a new myth for a nation only just identifying itself.

Another reason for rejecting a closer mirroring of the old tales is that they have become identified with the North's cultural genealogy. The body of Western literature is not just weighted with allusions to the ancients, it is seen as inheriting an unbroken tradition that goes back to Homer and Virgil. The beliefs, metaphors and values that exist in Homer form a foundation of Western thought and have been the stuff of Western education for the last thousand years. Walcott himself was taught in a system that was a late phase of that development and which was also a tool for the maintenance of the North's cultural imperium over its colonial subjects. Homer *et al*, properly taught, would produce little black or brown clones who would be useful citizens of the Empire and would not dream of leaving it. He wished to deconstruct the North's cultural dominance, or at least avoid the charge from more militant Africanist writers that he was writing within a discredited tradition and betraying his people in the process.

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<sup>3</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Nancy Schoenberger 1983, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 92.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Walcott, *Sea Grapes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976) and *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 297.

Walcott's borrowings from Homer are therefore peripheral to his narratives and serve largely to provide resonance and depth to some of the characters. We are able to see in Achille some of Achilles' good and bad qualities, Helen's dark beauty is the more so because of that earlier, fairer Helen, Hector's pride is familiar and so on.

However, Walcott telescopes and recombines myth to suit his purpose and no allusion is purely Homeric. Had he done no more than this, the Homeric aspects of his poem would have been of passing interest.

Walcott went further, when he introduced Homer himself into the poem. By allowing Homer his own voice, he was able to reinvent the poet as his own man, timeless, demotic, a man from the margins and separate from the corrupt and oppressive culture that has over the millennia come to appropriate him as its own.

He takes the traditional Eurocentric myth of St Lucia ('the Helen of the West') and dismisses that as a means of showing what the island is today. He does so both explicitly ('These Helens are different creatures' LXII/11/9) and implicitly, by showing how multi-faceted are his characters' resemblances to mythical ones. Helen is not Helen of Troy, nor Mary Mother of God, but shows aspects of both. Hector is also Phaeton. Achille is Achilles but also Bloom in his gentleness. These myths are just metaphors for aspects of their characters, no more. If we had not read Homer, or Joyce, or the Bible, Helen, Hector and Achille would still live in Gros Îlet and be themselves and do their thing. As Terada says, 'The validity of similitude [between

the Caribbean and Greek Helens] falls into doubt'.<sup>5</sup> It is, in fact, shown to be irrelevant.

Walcott showed that the 'Helen of The West' myth, far from being homage to the island's beauty, was in fact a tragic story: 'She had changed hands thirteen times. She had been regularly violated.'<sup>6</sup> Burnett points to the need for a countermyth and sees Walcott's Helen in *Omeros* as a powerful positive. She also sees a lunar triad, 'with the triple aspects of the goddess figured as aged, mature, and immature woman. Maud, the old moon, whose cycle (of white domination) is done, yields place to Helen, who is taking over, coming into her inheritance [...] while the third figure, the nymph, is just coming into view as the girl, Christine, who arrives to help Ma Kilman [...].'<sup>7</sup> Christine is described in LXIII/i/3 as 'like a new Helen'.

Walcott, writing of another myth, that of the noble savage, said, 'The great poetry of the New World does not pretend to such innocence, its vision is not naïve. [It has] the tartness of experience. In such poetry there is a bitter memory and it is the bitterness that dries last on the tongue. It is the acidulous that supplies its energy.' His solution is therefore not the amnesia he has previously described as 'the true history of the New World.' What happened is to be remembered and used to energise the islands and their poetry.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry*, p. 184.

<sup>6</sup> Derek Walcott, 'Leaving School', reprinted in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 113.

<sup>8</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Muse of History* in *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, pp. 40-41.

## 7. Intertexts

### *The dry-eyed Latin word*

#### 7.1 Borrow and Appropriate

Walcott's use of intertextuality is thorough-going, in style earlier on in his career and in subject and content throughout. From his early days, he saw mimicry of great writing as part of an essential apprenticeship, and his works are a history of influences, acknowledged and explored. Appropriation and adaptation of previous work are considered inevitable in the postmodern world and Walcott acknowledges doing so with enthusiasm: 'I have always tried to keep my mind Gothic in its devotions to the concept of master and apprentice...One's own voice is an anthology of all the sounds one has heard.'<sup>1</sup> And earlier, in 1977, he had made clear that while what mattered was 'to find a voice that was not inflected by influences', he knew 'I had to absorb everything in order to be able to discover what I was eventually trying to sound like', and 'you just ravage and cannibalise anything as a young poet.'<sup>2</sup>

There is a political dimension to this being done by a post-colonial writer. There is a real shift of power in which the canon is appropriated and the margin takes over the centre. 'Simply to absorb European intertexts is to remain a "colonial" poet. In contrast, creative adaptation and counter-discursive subversion of such influences suggests a "post-colonial" consciousness [...].'<sup>3</sup> Walcott rejects Naipaul's notion of a client culture and refutes the charge of imitation. 'To be told by politicians, or by

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Leif Sjöberg 1983, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Edward Hirsch 1977, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> John Thieme, *Derek Walcott*, p. 29.



critics, or by anyone at all...that you are imitating is odd. On the one hand you say embrace, and on the other you say don't imitate. But you cannot embrace without imitation. The trouble is that when the empire does it, it is known as acquisition and when it is done by colonials it is known as imitation. The amorality of that is absurd.'<sup>4</sup>

In Walcott's words, 'It is this whole freshness of experience that made me feel that my references to Homer, and to all the other writers I was indebted to in the book, were perfectly valid.'<sup>5</sup> None of this is to imply a commitment to mimicry at the expense of mimesis. *Omeros* deals directly with the problem of mimesis, one of its main themes being the search for a light beyond metaphor, a way of seeing and describing the world as it is. Terada points out that *Omeros*, as a poem about the genealogy of sons and fathers, is 'a parable of poetic influence' that also, as a poem about writing poetry, 'clarifies Walcott's notions of representation'.<sup>6</sup>

## 7.2 Homer and Virgil

Walcott was defensive about the classical borrowings in *Omeros* as soon as it was published. 'I know what's going to happen with this book. People are going to say, "Oh, Walcott, now he is going for the big bucks. There's the *Iliad*, there's the *Odyssey*, there's *Ulysses* and now he figures, well, I'm ready now – here's my big one.'"...So what's going to happen? The parenthesis, the large parenthesis will begin.

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<sup>4</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Anthony Milne 1982, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 76.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Walcott, 'Reflections on *Omeros*', reprinted in *The Poetics of Derek Walcott: Intertextual Perspectives*, p. 240.

<sup>6</sup> Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry*, p. 6.

Everyone will put in a bracket – now he is trying to do *Ulysses*.’<sup>7</sup> He went on to say it was humorous for him to try to recapture, or make a parallel of the Caribbean prior to Greece. He stressed the differences (‘An almond leaf is not an olive leaf’) and said that art, literature were what made a leaf important.

The borrowings from Homer, and the odd bit of Virgil, are mostly character traits, or distant allusions to events. They are so generic, given the way the classics have become incorporated in Western thought, that they are not borrowings so much as the use of a common and long-established language that happens to have nouns that include a beauty called Helen, a sulky hero called Achilles, a wounded Philoctetes. Walcott denied reading Homer in his entirety – “‘I never read it,’/I said. “Not all the way through.”’ (LVI/iii/4) and ‘I don’t know the *Iliad* and I don’t know the *Odyssey*. I’ve never read them.’<sup>8</sup> He does not attempt in *Omeros* an updating or a significant retelling in the Caribbean context, but his play *The Odyssey*, worked on during the same period and completed soon afterwards, is much more faithful to the Homeric storyline. His claim not to have read Homer should not be taken entirely at face value.

### 7.3 Dante

Though there are more identifiable parallels between Dante and *Omeros*, Walcott was again at pains to deny too deliberate a borrowing. He pointed out, maybe with his tongue in his cheek, that a volcano (‘a standard plot in any epic’) was a natural

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<sup>7</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Robert Brown and Cheryl Johnson 1990, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, pp.182-3.

<sup>8</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J. P. White 1990, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 173.

metaphor for the dead emerging from the mists, but that as soon as he wrote that people were going to think of Dante. Only folk who did not know Dante would see the image as he, Walcott, thought of it.<sup>9</sup> Fumagalli's painstaking analysis and her discussion with Walcott draw out a far more complete truth.

Fumagalli points out that the structure of *Omeros* is 'thoroughly Dantesque. The book is a re-enactment of the same spiritual journey by different characters (Walcott/Narrator, Achille, Philoctete, Major Plunkett) led by alternating guides.' She goes on to state that the 'cinematic' aspect of *Omeros* owes much to Dante. In interview with her, Walcott says, 'the antecedent of cinema is Dante; no other poet has his cinematic transparency.' He also praises Dante's use of parenthesis as a means of concentrating experience into something like an epiphany.<sup>10</sup> He uses the technique himself, for example at LVI/i/7, where Walcott interrupts his morning view from the hotel for the journey with *Omeros* through Malebolge, ending at LIX/i.

Fumagalli compares the meetings between Walcott and his father's ghost in *Epitaph for the Young* and *Omeros* and says that putting the works side by side offers 'a unique insight into both Walcott's development as a poet and his assimilation of Dante.' She sees a significant development in the adoption of *terza rima* in the later work, relating this to Warwick's injunctions to Walcott in *Omeros* to 'give those feet a voice' (XIII/iii/12). She interprets that as 'implicitly urging him to reconsider precisely the Dantesque aspects that were neglected in the *Epitaph* – "local intensity," the use of the vernacular, and perhaps, as a "voice" for those "feet", *terza rima*.' and suggests that he had by this time (the writing of *Omeros*) 'assimilated Dante almost to

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<sup>9</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Robert Brown and Cheryl Johnson 1990, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 185.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, pp. 190-191 and 277.

the point of second nature.’<sup>11</sup> We shall see in the section on Prosody below that in respect of *terza rima*, the assimilation was less than complete.

There is a more direct borrowing in XLIX/i/8, where Ma Kilman’s scrubbing of Philoctete’s face parallels Dante’s *Purgatorio*, *Canto I*, where Virgil wets his hands with dew from the grass and wipes Dante’s tearful face, cleansing him of Hell’s foulness. Philoctete has a Dantesque aspect, too, in that he represents the loss of language after the Middle Passage and generations of slavery. With this in mind, Fumagalli points out the similarity of Dante’s *Purgatorio I* ‘Ma qui la morta poesi resurga’ (‘but let dead poetry rise again’) to Philoctete’s resurrection, ‘Philoctete shook himself up from the bed of his grave’ (XLVIII/ii/15).<sup>12</sup>

Both *Another Life* and *Omeros* associate Soufrière with Dante’s Malebolge. It is at Soufrière that Walcott’s Narrator is led through the Eighth Circle of Hell encountering the damned. One of the spectres of the Malebolge the Narrator meets is Hector’s, shouldering an oar in Dantesque *contrapasso*, retribution befitting his crime of abandoning the sea (*Epitaph for the Young* had also included *contrapasso*). He also meets Charon, who is grizzled with white stubble on his chin, like Dante’s Charon ‘bianco per antico pelo’. Fumagalli analyses the Narrator’s journey through the Malebolge in detail, finding parallels throughout.<sup>13</sup>

Though the detailed comparisons are there and many in Fumagalli, it is clear from Walcott’s comments and her own analysis that he turned to Dante in the first place for reasons of language rather than story or character. He praises Dante’s ‘permanent

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<sup>11</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, pp. 193-4.

<sup>12</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, pp. 200-201.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, pp. 207-212.

immediacy, the permanent freshness of his work', precisely the quality he was seeking in his quest for a light beyond metaphor, and goes on to draw a relationship of simplicity and narrative power between Dante and one of his other models for the writing in *Omeros*, Hemingway. He emphasises Dante's visual, almost pictorial, imagery [...] 'far stronger than it is in Hemingway', something that appealed to both the artist and writer in Walcott. He then says that 'what is really startling in Dante is a thing that no other writer has – that is parenthesis, a parenthesis that contains sometimes more drama than the action.'<sup>14</sup>

For Walcott, Dante's dialogues 'are amazing.' He praises them for the same reasons: immediacy, simplicity and furthermore their rhythm and vernacular power. 'The really, really astonishing thing in Dante, in fact, is to have a tone that is not rhetorical.' It is those that he will have had in mind, when constructing his exchanges in patois and English Creole. '[Y]ou always have to decide, in the greatest poetry, if somebody is capable of such speech.'<sup>15</sup>

It is notable that when his Narrator is led through the Malebolge, he is most in danger when he meets the self-satisfied poets, condemned to the pit for seeing only the surface of things, who 'smiled at their similes'. Walcott is fleeing pride in his craft and is only saved from slipping back by Omeros, whom he begs for another chance at language (LVIII/iii/4-9).

He places himself thus in the company of two of the acknowledged classical masters of Old World literature. Though he alludes to them strongly in both the framework of

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<sup>14</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, pp. 276-277.

<sup>15</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, pp. 280.

his story and, at first, his metaphors, his wish to emulate their approach to language (simple, vernacular, direct) requires him ultimately to move to new, local metaphors and a story that is firmly of St Lucia today. By adopting his masters and then moving on, he places himself and St Lucia as both bearers and renewers of tradition, at neither the centre nor the periphery of the Old Culture but at the forefront of something new.

## 7.4 Hemingway

Walcott expressed admiration for Hemingway's clarity of style in *Another Life*<sup>16</sup> and in his comments to Fumagalli.<sup>17</sup> He also said, 'But Hemingway, like Homer, never exaggerates nature, he is always astonishingly exact. A writer has to have the light itself in his wrist to produce such clarity.'<sup>18</sup>

There is more direct correspondence in Achille's voyage to Africa, where the feel of the whole passage is in keeping with *The Old Man and the Sea*. The outward and return voyages in Chapters XXIV and XXX contain elements that match well the Hemingway story (page numbers from the Arrow Books edition)<sup>19</sup>:

<i>Omeros</i>	<i>The Old Man and the Sea</i>
the 'sea-swift' (XXIV/i/1)	sea swallows (p. 19)
the 'man-o'-war bird' (XXX/i/14)	the 'man-o'-war bird' (p.22)

<sup>16</sup> Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh, *Derek Walcott, Another Life, fully annotated*, line 1751.

<sup>17</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, pp. 278.

<sup>18</sup> Derek Walcott, *On Hemingway* from *What the Twilight Says*, p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (London: Arrow Books, 2004), Chapters XXIV and XXX

the 'purple-blue water' (XXIV/i/8)	'The water was dark blue now, so dark it was almost purple' (p. 24)
the 'scorched sail//stitched from old flour sacks' (XXIV/ii/14-15)	'the sail [...] patched with flour sacks' (p. 3)
Achille pouring water over his head (XXIV/ii/23)	'He lifted some sea water [...] and put it on his head' (p. 67)
the line sawing Achille's palms' sealed calluses (XXIV/ii/27)	'he tried to keep the cutting across the calloused parts' (p. 63)
urinating over the side (XXIV/i/4-5)	urinating over the side (p. 34)
the catching of an albacore (XXX/i/6)	the catching of an albacore (p. 27)
watching an aeroplane (XXIX/iii/17)	watching an aeroplane (p.53)

**Table 7.4.1** Correspondences between *Omeros* and *The Old Man and the Sea*

It can be argued that these are the stuff of deep sea fishing everywhere in the tropics, but taken together and with the tone of the writing it is clear Walcott had absorbed much from Hemingway and, more likely, is paying him deliberate homage.

## 7.5 Heaney

Seamus Heaney is from another colonised island, Ireland, and is a friend of Walcott's who shares his interest in Dante and Homer. Like Walcott, he was teaching in Boston during the writing of *Omeros*. Walcott said of his friendship with Heaney (and Brodsky), 'We get on well, we all like corny humour. I like men who can bullshit. They can.' King also states that Heaney and Walcott 'shared the notion of poetry being a meta-language, a language found in nature itself.'<sup>20</sup>

It is interesting that in 1990, when *Omeros* was published, Seamus Heaney also published his play *The Cure at Troy*, which deals with the Philoctetes story in the context of Northern Ireland's long conflict.<sup>21</sup>

Walcott had dedicated his previous volume of poetry, *The Arkansas Testament*, to Heaney in 1987.<sup>22</sup> It is unlikely that they were this close without discussing current work and there are several points at which Walcott may be paying his friend a compliment, or perhaps having a quiet joke with him by quotation. There are potential links with Heaney's poem 'Seeing Things'.<sup>23</sup>

In LI/ii/4, Walcott writes 'balcony/uprights under which he passed rippling like water', while Heaney has the line, 'the air we stood up to our eyes in wavered/like the zig-zag hieroglyph for life itself.' In LI/ ii/4-5 the reference to water is followed by a stanza containing half a dozen 'w' words, the letter imitating the waves. This is an interesting parallel to Heaney's reference to the hieroglyph for the Nile, the double zig-zag.

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<sup>20</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott, A Caribbean Life*, p. 377.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 36-43 and 165-204.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, pp. 467 and 494.

<sup>23</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 17.



In LII/ii/Stanza 16, the trochees of ‘post-red double-deckers, spit-and-polished leather’ are perhaps indicative of military precision, but also perhaps acknowledging Heaney’s trochaic opening to *Seeing Things*, ‘Inishbofin on a Sunday morning./Sunlight, turfsmoke, seagulls, boatslip, diesel’.

In LVI/iii/9 ‘numbered peace’ has a faint echo of Heaney’s ‘numbered heads’ in *Seeing Things*. Heaney’s poem has other words that are striking in their context and may be matched to Walcott’s equally striking use. Heaney’s ‘utter visibility’ meets Walcott’s ‘utter extinction’ (XIII/iii/5), a phrase where ‘utter’ is not strictly needed. Heaney’s ‘shadowy, unshadowed stream’ finds ‘shadowy grin’ (XIX/i/10). Heaney’s horse is ‘fresh’ as is Walcott in ‘Master, I was the freshest of all your readers’ (LVI/iii/10). Heaney’s horse that ‘rusted’ (meaning ‘took fright’) speaks to Walcott’s many uses of the word but especially the egret’s ‘one rusted cry’ (I/i/10). Heaney’s ‘clatter’ of stones on a shed roof finds Walcott’s ‘clatter/of cutlery in a sink’ (XXXIII/ii/10). There is even a suggestion of Heaney’s hyphenated ‘seeable-down-into water’ in Walcott’s ‘corked-too-tight/explosives of ginger-beer’ (LV/i/4).

All this could simply be the stuff of intertextuality but if Walcott has deliberately nodded to Heaney’s poem it is not surprising, given their closeness and the poem’s title, form and subject. It is a triptych in which the nature of reality, seeing and figuration are explored through sustained metaphors about water.

## 7.6 Auslander

As a footnote to Walcott's influences, it is interesting to look at Joseph Auslander's *Cyclops' Eye*.<sup>24</sup> This is the earliest complete volume of modern poetry, as opposed to anthologies, Walcott can remember reading and as such might be expected to colour his work somewhat.<sup>25</sup>

Its modernist verse is strongly rhymed, though in places a lighter rhyme shows through. The verse form is flexible, almost every line finding its rhyme, but in loose rather than unvarying patterns. Line lengths vary. The extensive enjambment is noticeable. The whole effect is flowing.

The subject matter is everyday and classical. The sense of story-telling is strong. The collection begins with an eight-page poem about a dead steel-worker and his wife, and the grim, brave life they lead. There are poems to Medusa and Leda, mother of Helen. The poet's mother and sisters are compared favourably to 'dead Helen'. Circe appears. The language is stylised but in no way high-flown.

Much of this is in tune with Walcott's early and developing style. It would be unwise to read more into the work. However, there are small examples of text that may have persisted at the back of Walcott's mind as he wrote *Omeros*. The Cyclops and its Eye of Auslander's title poem appear five times in *Omeros*, for example in XIX/iii/1.

Auslander's 'Now another fall/Runs all amuck with colour; and it soon/Will be white winter smoking under the moon' (p.97) speaks clearly to Walcott's 'Red god gone with autumn and white winter early' (XLII/ii/3), though Walcott transforms the image

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph Auslander, *Cyclops' Eye* (New York and London: Harper Brothers, 1926), pp. as cited in text.

<sup>25</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 44.

into something much more succinct, strongly rhythmic and memorable. We hear ‘the good grunt of swine’ (p.119), like Walcott’s ‘sweet-grunting sow’ (XXV/ii/5). Spring has ‘wild grey’ eyes (p.12), like Maud’s (LXI/i/12).

The poet severs his heart with a hatchet (p.42), as Philoctete thinks of doing to his foot (IV/i/12). Veins transform to roots (p.69) like Ma Kilman’s (XLVIII/i/25). ‘Ulysses in Autumn’ (pp. 73-4) has Ulysses yearning for the sea again, reminded by bird-prints on the beach and hurled ‘headlong to the ships’, like Achille and his canoe lunging for ‘bird-printed islets’ (in I/ii/17). Grass is a green spear (p.81 and XVII/i/8). Auslander writes, in the title poem, ‘I have heard their drums and seen their colours curled’ (p.122), a title Walcott chose when writing his pageant for the first West Indies Parliament, *Drums and Colours*.

There is enough to add Auslander to Walcott’s long list of writers he has absorbed and uses as raw material. His greatest influence at this stage is himself, of course.

## 7.7 Walcott

It is natural that a writer so attuned to the borrowing of influences should look to his own work as well. Walcott is exceptional in the extent to which he self-quotes and adapts elements of previous works, particularly the ones that tell most about his own life. There is an established line of development for Walcott’s more autobiographical works, from *Epitaph for the Young*, through *Another Life* and ‘The Schooner *Flight*’ to ‘The Light of the World’ and *Omeros*.

Walcott's self-quotation in *Omeros* from the whole range of his writing is too extensive to detail here. There are dozens of images that have appeared in earlier works, beginning as early as 1949 in *Epitaph for the Young*, where Walcott speaks to his dead father ('if I had voice, you had not died so young...' (Canto VIII) updated in *Omeros* "'Now that you are twice my age, which is the boy's,/which the father's?" "Sir" – I swallowed – "they are one voice." (XII/i/9)).

As might be expected, his most-recently-previous long autobiographical work, *Another Life* (1973), contains many of the same basic images. Among others, we find folk-remedies, 'stinking compounds' and the obeah-man (AL lines 561-6)<sup>26</sup>, coal-carriers (AL lines 674-689), history and amnesia (AL lines 1222-1223), taro leaves likened to Africa (AL line 1235), the horned island (AL line 1783), rain like nails (AL line 2456) etc.

There are encounters with a ghost, battles in imagination with 'primitive' natives, fishermen drinking l'absinthe standing up, a waitress in national costume and the many classical references that have always formed a substrate to his work. He lifts a joke from one of his plays, where in XXX/i/2 he writes of Achille's trip to Africa 'You walk ?' This joke, and the whole episode of a dream visit to Africa, is in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, first produced in 1967. Ma Kilman appears in *Sea Grapes* in 1976 while *The Gulf* (1969), *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1980), *Midsummer* (1984) all contain references recognisable in *Omeros*, but these and the others touched on are merely part of a vocabulary Walcott has built up. Their use in *Omeros* is as fresh as that of any other components of his language.

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<sup>26</sup> Line numbers from Derek Walcott, *Another Life, fully annotated* (Baugh and Nepaulsingh).

The works, particularly *Another Life* and *Omeros*, have to have come from the same mind, but what has changed is the tone, which is more lyrical, and the perspective, which is broader, less personal. Also, Walcott has created an oral narrative in which recursion and parenthetical episodes remind the reader/listener and introduce elaboration where it is needed, techniques that Ashcroft *et al* noted as features of traditional narration and orature.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the work is more of a piece. Where *Another Life* is distinctly episodic, following the arc of Walcott's life, *Omeros* is recursive, every reference picked up again, reworked and re-presented, the reader swept back and forth through Time and Space and finding double and triple meanings at every full stop.

## 7.8 Other Sources

Walcott pays brief homage to many other writers in the poem. There is a short passage based on Joyce in XXXIX/iii, in which Walcott picks out iconic references (Anna Livia, Hawth, the Martello, The Dead etc) and touches of Joycean style. Eliot gets brief quotes from *The Waste Land*, *Prufrock*, 'Sweeney Erect' and *Four Quartets*.

Virgil, Shakespeare, Milton, Lamb, Blake, Dickinson, Melville, Graves, Auden, Césaire, St John Perse, Rilke, Browning, Byron, Keats, Tennyson, Wordsworth, George Eliot, Kipling, Hopkins, Pound, Dylan Thomas, Larkin, MacLeish, Lowell, Wilbur, Brodsky and Kathleen Raine are all detectable, as mentioned in the

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<sup>27</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 184.

Annotations. However, Homer and Dante apart, the mature Walcott is less interested in flaunting his influences than he was as a young writer.

## 8. Dualism

*The shadowy, unshadowed stream*

### 8.1 Contradiction

Walcott was born in January, the elder of twins. While it is too fanciful to imagine that he was thereby fated to look both ways and see everything in terms of twos, his ludic mind enjoyed playing with the possibilities opened to him. Born under Aquarius, he says, 'my sign was water,/tears, and the sea,/my sign was Janus,/I saw with twin heads,/and everything I say is contradicted'.<sup>1</sup> The sign for Aquarius is the twin zig-zag hieroglyph representing the Nile. He is also a mulatto, having white grandfathers and black grandmothers. Again he is neither one thing nor the other, but 'between', the chameleon, changing his colours and seeing through two independent eyes.

These accidents of birth set up interesting opposites and combinations. To whatever small degree they have influenced his philosophy, his political stance or his recognition that the Caribbean is between Africa (the old culture), and America (the new philistinism), they fit. Furthermore, they may have influenced his dialectical method.

Contradiction is at the heart of this. He wrote of his mixed European and African ancestry, 'I who am poisoned with the blood of both,/Where shall I turn, divided to

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh, *Derek Walcott, Another Life, fully annotated*, lines 3275-9.

the vein?’ (‘A Far Cry from Africa’).<sup>2</sup> All poets share a vision in which connections are made, through metaphor, to illuminate the subject. Walcott has developed a dualist method, part of which sets one thing against another, using the power of reversal or contradiction to transform. Burnett expresses the same idea about a play Walcott worked on at the same time as *Omeros*, when she says, ‘Walcott’s method in *The Ghost Dance* is Brechtian in that he proposes contradictory signs to encourage dialectical thought’.<sup>3</sup>

The other, related aspect of this approach is his readiness to stand on both sides of the issue. The word ‘dualism’ instead of ‘binarism’ recognises that Walcott follows both options, instead of choosing one or the other extreme, not ‘*either-or*’ but ‘*both-and*’. Fumagalli makes a similar point in respect of *Another Life*, when she writes, ‘Walcott seems to have constantly had in mind Dante’s double paradigm of the ‘this *and* that’, ‘now *and* then’’.<sup>4</sup>

## 8.2 Pairings

*Omeros* is full of pairings. These are more than encounters necessitated by plot. They explore fundamental similarities and differences in motivation and personality, as if Walcott, in conversation with the reader or himself, wishes to acknowledge the complexity character brings to the simplest interactions.

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<sup>2</sup> Derek Walcott, *In a Green Night, Poems 1948-60*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962) and *Collected Poems 1948-84*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 264

<sup>4</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, p. 68.



Helen is between two men, Achille, who represents the traditional way of life and rails at tourists who treat him as part of the photogenic scenery, and Hector, who represents the new commerce and tries to profit from the tourists, though the new pace of life eventually kills him. However, Walcott does not allow them to be that simple. Achille seeks shells to sell to the tourists to buy back Helen's love, and Hector feels a longing for the way of life he has rejected.

Helen represents the island. She sees qualities in and is vexed with both her suitors. She is beautiful, proud, quick to anger, living for the easy pleasure of the jump-up, resenting the tourists but making a living off them, learning caution over money when she becomes pregnant but 'don't know for who' (VI/i/11-12). She bears the future, but it is not clear whether the father is Achille or Hector.

The colonialist, Plunkett, who might have been a simple hate-figure, is an exile himself, coming to the island in search of a home. He loves his wife Maud, an unwilling exile, yet maltreats her and lusts after Helen. Though he patronises the black islanders, he has himself seen discrimination (of class rather than colour), feels on the side of the common man and eventually comes to treat the islanders as equals. Of all the characters, he is the only one to be wounded twice, once in the war and again by the death of his wife. He ends the book a sympathetic figure.

The Narrator, Walcott himself, has a symptomatic twin in the character of the initial narrator, Philoctete ('There was no difference/between me and Philoctete (XLVIII/iii/2), 'we shared the one wound, the same cure'(LIX/i/8)), their wound a need to belong, in their island and in their language. The blurring of the boundary

between self and other is implicit in a project that sees both sides of every question and is personified in the Narrator figure. He is both son and father, 'one voice' (XII/i/9), is 'both there and not there' as Plunkett looking at his wife Maud sewing (LIII/ii/5-6). He is a divided soul not just in his blood, but in his love (should he love a woman or the Muse) and in his emotional centre (is he a St Lucian or a wanderer without a home). Philoctete is divided in a similar sense. His wound is the wrong name he was given because of slavery, a name which at a crisis point he wants to cut off (IV/i/11-12). His cure begins with Ma Kilman speaking the language of ants and her African grandmother (XLVIII/ii/12) and ends cathartically with her quenching his 'shame for the loss of words, and a language tired/of accepting that loss' (XLIX/ii/8-9).

Ma Kilman goes to Mass and takes Communion, but feels 'an old African/doubt' when doing so (X/ii/9). King-Pedroso says that she is 'between Catholicism and the religion of the Yoruba and Dahomeans'.<sup>5</sup> She is believed to be '*gardeuse*, sybil, obeah-woman' (X/ii/8) and proves to be capable of curing Philoctete by retrieving a race memory and finding the herb needed.

### 8.3 Dualism, not Binarism

Burnett argues that in these binary links between personae, within and across gender and racial groups, Walcott offers an alternative to the Western emphasis on individualism and difference.<sup>6</sup> In Achille's and Philoctete's androgynous Christmas masquerade (LV/iii/1-11), Walcott offers a heroic model that is an alternative to the

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<sup>5</sup> Natalie King-Pedroso, *Journal of Caribbean Studies* Vol 15, 1 and 2 (Fall 2000), p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, pp. 16-20.

strict binarism of phallic violence or emasculation. In doing so he brings a new option to the colonial/neocolonial problem of constructing a masculine subject-position.<sup>7</sup> Freudian alienation and the suppression of difference within groups, better to delineate boundaries, are replaced by an embracing of difference as the thing that is shared, a new basis for nationhood and human-ness. Rather than negritude's attempt to move privilege from one pole to the other, polarisation is rejected altogether.

This is in sympathy with the *I-an-I* concept of Rastafarianism, where the pronoun includes both singular *I* and plural *we*, rejecting the boundary between the individual and the other. Walcott sympathises with all of his characters. There are no villains in *Omeros*, only people coping.

He reflects this in the closing stanzas of XXXIII/iii, where, by letting in his fears as guests and seeing their humanity, he finds room for pity and turns the house into a home. This passage embodies his method. It offers an inclusive solution, set in binary metre in the middle of the poem, contradictory in its form to the accepted hexameter and symbolic in its position. From this point on he will begin to resolve the conflicts and argue with the positions set up in the first half of the poem.

In this transformation of house to home, he is speaking both of himself and of his nation. This transformation, what Burnett calls 'metamorphic magic', is at the core of Walcott's dualist strategy for the Caribbean.<sup>8</sup> Instead of joining the negritude debate, he contradicts the negative implications of both sides in that debate by reversing the 'back-to-Africa' theme and making the migrant position one of opportunity. When, at

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<sup>7</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 27.

the end of 'The Muse of History',<sup>9</sup> he thanks his African and English ancestors who conspired in slavery for delivering him to this new Eden, Fumagalli says it is if he had drunk from Lethe and Eunoë, Dante's rivers of oblivion and good remembrance.<sup>10</sup> Burnett says, 'He understands his task as to make the rhetoric of affirmation – the praise song – outdo in appeal the rhetoric of grief.'<sup>11</sup>

In doing so, he is content to draw on both sides of his inheritance. Ma Kilman's cure (XLIX/i-ii) for Philoctete's wound (which represents the loss of identity suffered by all transported to the Caribbean) is both African, a shamanistic cure using a herbal bath, and a Christian baptism. The 'font', symbolically, is a rusting relic of colonial times, made new by being scraped and scoured. When Ma Kilman washes Philoctete's face, it is Virgil purifying Dante after his journey through hell by washing his face in dew.<sup>12</sup> His rebirth as Adam in Eden is Biblical, not African, but we are reminded by his standing upright in his bath of *Australopithecus afarensis*, the bipedal hominid skeleton called Lucy (happy coincidence of name and an Eve-equivalent), an African creature.

Burnett sees in Walcott's recurrent symbol, the swift, a doubling of Greek mythology with Christian symbolism, an oracular bird representing Athena's owl and the dove of Christian revelation, one of several such doublings in Walcott's creation of a cross-cultural mythology.<sup>13</sup>

By using Plunkett as a colonialist alter ego, Walcott is allowed to argue for Art while Plunkett argues for History. Though Art must win in Walcott's book, the argument is

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<sup>9</sup> Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, p. 64.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, p. 200.

<sup>13</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott, Politics and Poetics*, p. 106.

more even handed than straight polemic would have allowed and he concedes that  
‘There, in her head of ebony,/there was no real need for the historian’s/remorse, nor  
for literature’s. Why not see Helen/as the sun saw her’ (LIV/ii/8-9).

Dualism, what Burnett calls ‘simultaneous difference and similitude’,<sup>14</sup> operates in  
Walcott’s work at the personal and at the geo-political level. His people are  
individuals and members of one another, his islands are separate and part of an  
archipelago, Africa and the West Indies are separated by and joined by the Atlantic.  
His vision allows him to see past and present both simultaneously and separately, as  
when he writes in *Omeros*, (XLIV/iii/1-2):

Ah, twin-headed January, seeing either tense:

a past, they assured us, born in degradation,

and a present that lifted us up with the wind’s

noise in the breadfruit leaves with such an elation

that it contradicts what is past!

It allows him to escape the victim-complex that looks back to the suffering under  
slavery but is trapped thereby into apathy or a desire to turn back the clock.

It also allows him to occupy two contradictory positions on European culture, to see it  
as a valid and vital source of artistic example and archetypes, and as a place of  
oppression and degeneracy. He sees Brixton whitewashed by the moon, ‘dark future

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<sup>14</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 40.

down darker street' (XXXVIII/iii/13) and is able to set himself the task of reinventing language and to set the Caribbean to becoming a new moral force. Burnett thinks Walcott's dark future may be a fine place to be.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, Walcott's philosophy allows him to come to terms with his own situation. His intense sense of 'home' in St Lucia demands he never leave, whereas a successful career as a poet demands he live in exile, an Odyssean binarism. He is able to have his dualistic cake and eat it by representing his St Lucian home to the world and creating a myth of '*home*' for the St Lucians.

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<sup>15</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 146.

## 9. Autobiography

*His ghosthood immanent*

### 9.1 The Stuff of his Life

Some scenes in *Omeros* can be related to Walcott's life, without any great significance in the connection. He has drawn on his travels for locations the way a film director might. So, when he watches horses on the savannah in Port of Spain (XLIV/i/4-13), he is thinking of the view from Queens Park Hotel, where he stayed and which he wrote about in *Midsummer*.<sup>1</sup> His lengthy periods in Boston will have given him material for the scenes there and in Marblehead (XXXVI).

King also mentions conferences or readings he attended in Toronto, Lisbon, London, Dublin and Holland in 1988 while working on *Omeros*. The encounter with a 'young Polish waitress with eyes/as wet as new coal' in Toronto, Lisbon's turtleback alleys, its castle in the olives and statue of King Jose 1 in the Praca do Comercio (XXXVII), London's St Martin-in-the-Fields, Trafalgar Square etc (XXXVIII), Dublin's Joycean associations and Glen-da-Lough (XXXIX) and maybe the Dutch scenes (XIV) will all have been informed by these visits.

### 9.2 Warwick and Alix

More interesting passages and the most explicitly autobiographical references in the poem come with Walcott/the Narrator's conversation with his father Warwick (XII and XIII) and his visit to his mother Alix (XXXII).

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Walcott, *Midsummer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p 13.

Warwick died when Walcott was three.<sup>2</sup> When Walcott meets the ghost of his father, Warwick shows him that his love of poetry is shared with his father and is in part a compensation for never having known him, 'the calling that you practise both reverses//and honours mine' (XII/i/8-9). Walcott admits his poetic voice is that of his father too. Warwick seems to disagree, saying that he never connected with foreign Literature and 'wrote with the heart/of an amateur. It's that Will you inherit.' (XII/i/12) Though ambiguous, this seems to suggest Walcott is the heir not of his amateurism but of the Western canon, of Will Shakespeare and his like.

Walcott walks with his father through Castries and sees it paralyzed by (Catholic) religion and by class based on shades of colour, 'their reveries were somewhere else,/they looked on their high-brown life as a souvenir/of a dried Easter palm' [...] 'rubbing their beads and muttering *Veni/Creator*' (XII/ii/6-7). Walcott wrote in *Epitaph for the Young*: The burden of my people; first/They would shed the racial pride and marry well,/That the child may not be darker than the father.'<sup>3</sup> Having white fathers, both of Walcott's parents had light brown skin and Alix boasted of her father's social standing based on colour.<sup>4</sup> Walcott had difficulty with the separateness that came from class and wrote of watching as a child poor black children playing and wanting to join them, until 'difference became a sadness, that sadness rage, and that longing to share their lives ambition, so that at least one convert was made.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Walcott, *Epitaph for the Young* (Barbados: Advocate Co., 1949, reprinted in *Agenda Vol. 39 Nos 1-3, Winter 2002 – 2003*), pp. 15-50.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, pp. 11 and 12.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, p. 20.



The remainder of Chapters XII and XIII allow Walcott to introduce descriptions of St Lucia's recent colonial past and to draw comparisons between white and black in that society. He also justifies his own dedication to poetry to the exclusion of all else by making that dedication stem from counsel by his father; 'Measure the days you have left. Do just that labour/which marries your heart to your right hand: simplify/your life to one emblem, a sail leaving harbour//and a sail coming in.' (XIII/ii/2-3).

Finally, Warwick gives Walcott his poetic charge, to give a voice to the ordinary labouring islanders, here in the form of the women who loaded the coal for the visiting liners when Castries was a coaling station. Walcott used to see the coal wharves when he visited his grandmother, Christiana, who lived down near the harbour.<sup>6</sup>

This interlude with his father's ghost has allowed Walcott to do several things: to give a recent historical perspective, to include the grapevine and the coaling scenes from his own childhood, to create a personality for and to talk with a father he never knew and finally to show how he views his own creative burden. He is identifying the Narrator figure with himself and becoming an actor in the poem, where previously (IV/iii) he had only been an observer.

The Narrator's visit to his mother provides further confirmation that he and Walcott are one person, through the names of her children (XXXII/i/13). The episode is a loving reflection on her, and on aging and the nature of Time. He sees her as lovely (XXXII/i/7) and saintly (XXXII/i/1 and 16), 'attractive' and 'saint' both terms that

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 16.

King also used in describing her<sup>7</sup>. The consequence of the visit is Walcott's sense of coming home to a place he had lost, rediscovering his lost language, his patois (XXXII/ii/7). When Walcott flies back to the USA, there is a crossing point with Achille's story (XXXII/iii/3).

Walcott uses this chapter to record both his affection for his mother and his own feelings of broken links being mended when he returns to the island after absence. He also co-locates his fictional character Achille with the real Alix, giving his tale greater truth.

### 9.3 Norline

Personal relationships appear elsewhere in the poem. In VII/iii, Walcott examines his broken third marriage with Norline, 'whose breezy vows assured me again/that never in my life had I been happier' and later, 'The spike for the Union Pacific had entered/my heart without cheers for her far gentler weapon./I could not believe it was over' (XXXIV/ii/2-3). When *Omeros* was being written, mainly in the USA, Norline had left Walcott and was back in St Lucia. King states that *Omeros* was written in part to work Walcott out of the emotional depression caused by the end of his marriage, with Helen representing aspects of Norline.<sup>8</sup> Plunkett's and Maud's childlessness may also have been informed by Norline miscarrying Walcott's child.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, pp. 12 and 14.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 519.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 408.

XXXIII/ii has Walcott lonely in his Brookline, Boston apartment, missing Norline, who has left him. At this period he was alone in Boston, without his friend Sigrid.<sup>10</sup> He lives the bachelor life, with an intensely habitual diet (XXXIII/ii/1-2), longing for letters (-/5), masturbating (-/8). He sees Norline in women he passes in supermarkets (-/12), trolleys (-/13), the streets (-/14). He has no-one to give flowers to (-/17), 'nowhere to go but home' (-/18), hoping for someone to be there to greet him (-/19). All this rings with the truth of Walcott's life, yet is objective, reportage almost.

#### 9.4 Introspection

Given the wryness and lack of self-pity in the previous section, the savagery of XXXIII/iii is shocking. Incantatory, in tetrameter and rhyming couplets, it stands out from the rest of the book in its form. At this stage, living in rented accommodation, his third marriage over, for most of the time without the company of his new partner Sigrid, Walcott embodied Gilkes' identification of the literary link between Man's 'unhoused' condition and a lack of psychic 'wholeness'.<sup>11</sup>

The section deals with Walcott's nightmare vision of a house that is his life history, full of anger and fear, beset by terrible, Poe-like memories. It is full too of his loneliness, travelling with just a toothbrush, 'sinning', masturbating again. Fifty seven unlucky years he has tried to exorcise by writing. He will not commit to live anywhere like this and keeps his real self inside him until he finds a house that opens with tenderness to admit fear and pity and thereby becomes a home. In this self-revelatory section, Walcott on Walcott, he is honest and brutal with himself. As

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 492.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Gilkes, *Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Novel* (Trinidad and Jamaica, London, Longman Caribbean, 1975), p. xx and note.

Terada comments in another context, 'Walcott, like Auden, suggests that poets are hurt into poetry, beating out art to compensate for their own injuries'.<sup>12</sup>

It might equally be said that great poets injure themselves and others through their commitment to their art. In XIX/iii/4, Walcott has Plunkett realise 'an old point –/that the harder he worked, the more he betrayed his wife'. His own guilt at his obsessive drive comes through, as it does where he writes, as Narrator, of his self contempt: 'the male,/like the dung-beetle storing up its dry feces,/can leave its exhausted mate hysterical, pale [...] then the usual epilogue/occurs, where one lies weeping, which the other hates./All I had gotten I deserved, I now saw this' (XLVIII/i/6-8). He goes on to write of 'the marriages dissolved like sand through the fingers/the *per mea culpa* that had emptied all hope' and 'the love I was good at seemed to have been only/the love of my craft and nature' (XLVIII/i/11-13).

## 9.5 Father Jesse

A more obscure reference to his poetic past can be found in XXXVIII/i/6-13. Here Omeros is seen off from the steps of St Martin-in-the-Fields by a 'raging sparrow of a church-warden'. Having dismissed the poet clutching his brown paper manuscript bound with grey twine, the 'choleric cleric' 'chirrup[s] up the steps back to its sanctuary'. It is not hard to see in this Father Jesse, the priest who publicly humiliated the fourteen-year-old Walcott, objecting in verse ('with polished pumps') to his first published poem because it preferred revelation through the study of nature rather than

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<sup>12</sup> Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry* p. 158.

through the teachings of the Church.<sup>13</sup> Father Jesse wrote, among his religious arguments against Walcott's poem, 'Dim thoughts do not a poet make' and 'Youth would have none to speak of God,/Except the tree, the ant, the sod!'. Walcott has Seven Seas/*Omeros* say, about his treatment by the curate, 'That's because I'm a heathen.' (LVI/iii/2), a position Father Jesse would have had no difficulty in adopting, in view of Walcott's Methodism and his opinion on revelation.

Father Jesse's hostility to the Walcotts became a feud lasting many years. King records that Walcott was still angry in his sixties (i.e. after *Omeros*) at Father Jesse and other priests for their hurts upon his family.<sup>14</sup> In conversation with Rodman in the early 1970's, Walcott spoke of not having 'any use for the Mafialike churches.'<sup>15</sup> He alludes directly to the gulf between St Lucian Catholics and Methodists in LIII/i/7-8.

A subtler influence on *Omeros* of this antipathy to Father Jesse may be found by those of a psychoanalytical tendency. The rejection of St Lucia's title *Helen of the West* and the repudiation of such classical metaphor that together are a driving force of the Narrator's tale in *Omeros*, may be linked to the lyric to St Lucia's national anthem, which contains the line 'Gone the times when nations battled for this Helen of the West', written in 1967 by one Father Charles Jesse.<sup>16</sup> Walcott wrote in 1970 of a choir, 'The worst song, the most sincerely sung, is an original, an anthem to the nation. The sentiments are infantile [...], the words and phrasing execrable.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, pp. 37-40.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> Selden Rodman, *Tongues of Fallen Angels* (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. 255.

<sup>16</sup> <<http://www.nationalanthems.info/lc.htm>> [accessed 25 February 2010]

<sup>17</sup> Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, p. 26.

## 9.6 Other Models

Walcott builds his characters from aspects of himself and of people he has known.

Seven Seas is modelled on Darnley, a blind man from Walcott's childhood. He wrote of him in *Another Life*, 'Seeing him, I practise blindness,/Homer and Milton in their owl-blind towers,/I envy him his great affliction'.<sup>18</sup>

Major E. O. Plunkett, in the Walcotts' social circle, gave his name to Plunkett in *Omeros*, while his wife Lucille, co-founder of the Arts and Crafts Society with Walcott's mentor Harold Simmons, was, like Maud Plunkett, keen on the use of local motifs in sewing quilts.<sup>19</sup> Plunkett, with his nose like 'a man-o'-war's beak' (XI/ii/5), teaching the cadets to march (LIII/ii/1) is T. E. Fox-Hawes in *Another Life*, 'our choleric, ginger-haired headmaster,/beak like an inflamed hawk's,/a lonely Englishman who loved parades'.<sup>20</sup> Fox-Hawes was headmaster of St. Mary's College from 1934-46 and was therefore in charge for most of Walcott's time as a pupil there.<sup>21</sup>

Ma Kilman may owe a little to Walcott's Great Aunt Sidone, who told folk tales and sang to the children 'a strange croaking of Christian and African songs'.<sup>22</sup>

## 9.7 Walcott the Writer

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<sup>18</sup> Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh, *Derek Walcott, Another Life, fully annotated*, lines 387-9.

<sup>19</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh, *Derek Walcott: Another Life, fully annotated*, lines 1644-6 and annotation p. 277.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Gachet FMI, *A History of the Roman Catholic Church in St Lucia* (Port of Spain: Key Caribbean Publications, 1975), p. 272.

<sup>22</sup> Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, p. 21.

The Narrator is Walcott, with parts of him reflected by other characters. Philoctete shares his concern for identity and language, 'khaki' Plunkett his uncertain acceptance by the negritude faction, his love of the island and his treatment of his wives, Achille his instinct for the natural and his anger at the effects of tourism, Hector his drive to escape the narrowness of the island, and his pride and touchiness, Helen his love of play and his self-containment, Maud his sense of exile and love of nature.

Walcott's voyage into poetry resulted in physical and spiritual journeys. In both, there is the impulse to leave the known and comfortable, seeking new aspects of self. Walcott dedicated his energies to working in the Caribbean until relatively late in his writing career but has since lived as an exile for much of the year. He understood from his own life that, as Burnett says, '[t]he inward journey of meditation is just as much of an odyssey as that of travel and bodily experience.'<sup>23</sup> So, in *Omeros*, Achille travels in spirit to Africa and in body down the islands, only to return from each journey to his home island, Omeros/Seven Seas is both traveller and trapped in St Lucia, Plunkett travels to his old home in England, only to find he now feels more at home in St Lucia. Seven Seas tells Walcott/the Narrator, 'You ain't been nowhere [...] there are two journeys/in every odyssey, one on worried water,//the other crouched and motionless, without noise./ For both, the 'I' is a mast'(LVIII/ii/3-7)

Gilkes expresses the same idea when he suggests that Walcott's 'life is made liveable precisely because it is lived in and through literature.'<sup>24</sup> Asked by Hamner about autobiographical aspects of *Another Life*, Walcott replied 'that it would be hard for one to leave out the details of a person's life in a book of that kind. It is a particular

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<sup>23</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 120.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Gilkes, *Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Novel*, p. xxv.

experience. But in a sense it is a biography of an 'intelligence', a West Indian intelligence.'<sup>25</sup> In other words, an 'intelligence' that is a composite character, an evocation of experience wider than any one person's.

This is equally true of *Omeros*. This is still partly a voyage within himself in search of self-understanding, some might think self-explanation, but it is also and mainly a poem about the St Lucian, the Caribbean 'intelligence'.

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<sup>25</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Robert D. Hamner in (1975), *World Literature Written in English Vol. 16. No. 2*. (Singapore: 1977), republished in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 23.



## 10. Dialects

### *Utter visibility*

### 10.1 Walcott's Languages

Walcott describes 'a simple schizophrenic boyhood' in which he led two lives, 'the interior life of poetry, the outward life of action and dialect.' 'The dusk was a raucous chaos of curses, gossip and laughter, everything performed in public, but the voice of the inner language was reflective and mannered[...] far above its subjects'.<sup>1</sup>

That separation existed too in the tongues he used, patois and English. The one language was acquired naturally, through the ear among his playfellows, the other largely as a result of voracious reading of the canon of Western literature in English, though also from his mother reciting around the house. He learned to be a poet through mimicking those writers, but he absorbed into his core the rhythms and tone of demotic speech, together with Creole metaphors: 'a little extravagant naming. Throughout my whole youth that was happening. It was the experience of a whole race renaming something that had been named by someone else and giving that object its own metaphoric power. That was a privilege of being born in what is usually called an underprivileged, backward, underdeveloped society. It was a primal situation.'<sup>2</sup>

Fumagalli points out that Walcott is like Dante, who learned his Latin through his vernacular Italian. English was Walcott's 'Latin' and he came to it through the

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Edward Hirsch 1977, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott* ed William Baer, p. 58

vernacular.<sup>3</sup> Walcott himself said, 'My real language, and tonally my basic language, is patois' (French Creole).<sup>4</sup> His standard English is an acquired language that came to him in the speech of his teachers and from literature. His choice for *Omeros* therefore was three-fold, to write in the language of the people (French Creole), or in that of the colonialist (Standard English), or, to use his phrase, to be 'the mulatto of style. The traitor. The assimilator.'<sup>5</sup>

## 10.2 Choosing the Third Way

Fumagalli's analysis of Dante's achievement is significant in understanding how Walcott might have viewed this last option. She says, 'Dante 'invents' a new language, together with a new set of images' and 'the verb 'to invent' (significantly) has to be understood according to the Latin etymon *invenire*, which means to find, to come upon. ... Dante's method for forging a new living idiom thus relies entirely upon his 'inventiveness''.<sup>6</sup> This is a quality that Walcott can never have doubted in himself, seeing the act of naming ultimately as an act of imagination. Another view on what may have encouraged Walcott towards this third way comes in Terada, where she quotes Beaujour that bilingual writers often seek a third language with which to reconcile the other two.<sup>7</sup>

Walcott's choice is strategic for his project for St Lucia. It must avoid locking the island into the victimhood and the barren *faux*-nostalgia of the slave-descendant

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<sup>3</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Robert Hamner (1975), *World Literature Written in English Vol. 16. No. 2.*, republished in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry*, p. 102.

wishing for Africa and it must encourage an independence from the old empires of France and England and the new, economic one of the USA. At the same time, his personal drive for recognition as an international poet and his polyglossia face him with the limiting effect of any single choice. Write in French or in standard English and he is excluding major sections of his public as well as ‘betraying’ one part of his island and genetic inheritance, write in Creole and he is excluding all but a local readership and the specialists, will even have to be translated.

He was drawn to Creole. Creoles were newer and therefore more vigorous, more alive, more natural. Terada suggests that for Walcott, this also means they are more literary, rather than less.<sup>8</sup> More than this, creolisation was one way (apart from open revolt, flight and minor disobediences and insolence – all of them severely punished) in which slaves were able to resist. Burton says, ‘Afro-Creole cultures [...] draw heavily on materials furnished by the dominant culture – notably language and religion – that they contrive [...] both to modify (without transforming them entirely) and to turn against the dominant culture in order to contest that culture.’<sup>9</sup>

Creole therefore has symbolic importance beyond its role as the language of the people. Walcott had been exploring the potential of Creole, using French patois in ‘Sainte Lucie’<sup>10</sup>, English Creole in ‘The Schooner *Flight*’<sup>11</sup>. He began to write *Omeros* in patois, but felt that for him it was an academic exercise. He liked the visual quality of the metaphors but found he lacked the vocabulary.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry*, p. 173.

<sup>9</sup> Richard D. E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Derek Walcott, *Sea Grapes and Collected Poems*, p. 309.

<sup>11</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Star Apple Kingdom*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, p. 281.

### 10.3 Writing Back

He felt that underneath the language it was a matter of tone, the validity of which takes half your life to establish.<sup>13</sup> In conversation with Fumagalli, he elaborated, ‘I began to feel that I was doing that effort [patois] out of some kind of national duty and I missed the excitement that I would have had in writing in English. Then I sort of reminded myself that what was important was not the language but the *tone* of the language and that speaking in English with the right tone would have been the same as writing in creole’.<sup>14</sup> Walcott sees his work as being written not in British but American English, which has the ‘vitality and vigour of dialect tone, of colloquial immediacy’.<sup>15</sup> He later expressed a similar ambition, to capture in English the rhythm of Creole.<sup>16</sup>

Elsewhere, he had heard in Césaire’s *Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal*, ‘a poem written tonally in Creole. Those tonal qualities are tartness and impatience.’<sup>17</sup> Also, as Burnett says, ‘Walcott sees himself as like Aimé Césaire in reinvesting a metropolitan language with specifically Caribbean meaning[...] The sense of the naming as a sacred rite, as an analogue of creation, pervades the work of Caribbean poets and is, as Kamau Brathwaite has reminded us, an essentially African approach to the Word.’<sup>18</sup> Walcott: ‘this new Word/was here, attainable/to my own hand,/in the

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<sup>13</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Robert Hamner (1975), *World Literature Written in English Vol. 16. no. 2.*, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, p. 281.

<sup>15</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, pp. 132-3.

<sup>16</sup> Derek Walcott, ‘The Length of the Breath’ in *Créolité and Creolisation* from *Documenta 11 – Platform 3* (2002) edited by Okwui Enwezor et al (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003), p. 243.

<sup>17</sup> Derek Walcott, ‘The Muse of History’, in *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, pp. 132-3.

deep country it found the natural man'.<sup>19</sup> He seeks to creolise the language of empire not just through adopting a Creole syntax but through a re-naming of the object world.

By choosing to write in English, Walcott made the inclusive choice typical of his dualist approach generally. In the theatre-language of his plays, he set out to find a form comprehensible to the whole English-speaking Caribbean, a fusion of all the dialects. He commented on this to Ciccarelli,<sup>20</sup> 'I can't create in pure Creole, French, or English, for all sorts of reasons...one must try to find, using syntaxes from various dialects if necessary, one form that would be comprehensible [...] to people everywhere.'

*Omeros* presented him with the same problem. As well as comprehensibility Walcott needed beauty and lyricism from his St Lucians. He said in 1979 of *The Sea at Dauphin*:

When I read Synge's *Riders to the Sea* I realised what he had attempted to do with the language of the Irish. He had taken a fishing port kind of language and gotten beauty out of it, a beat, something lyrical. Now that was inspiring, and the obvious model for *The Sea at Dauphin* ... When I tried to translate the speech of the St Lucian fishermen into an English Creole, all I was doing was taking that kind of speech and translating it, or retranslating it, into an English

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<sup>19</sup> Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh, *Derek Walcott, Another Life, fully annotated*, lines 979-982.

<sup>20</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Sharon Ciccarelli, 'Reflections Before and After Carnival' (1977), reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 42.

inflected Creole, and that was a totally new experience for me, even if it did come out of Synge.<sup>21</sup>

So, while the narrative gives the impression of being in standard English, its tone must make it seem ‘natural’ to an English-speaking native of St Lucia, or Jamaica, or Barbados etc, each of whom will speak a differently inflected English. When direct speech by St Lucians is included in the poem, a further linguistic shift needs to take place. Both must result in poetry and be, as Walcott said of this task to fuse the noble and the common language, ‘in a tone that is true to my own voice, in which both accents are heard naturally.’<sup>22</sup>

It is worth remembering in all this that the notion of ‘pure’ Creole or ‘pure’ Standard English being spoken in the Caribbean is contradicted by the degree of code-switching and code mixing that local speakers practise. Walcott is not alone in blending his codes.<sup>23</sup>

#### 10.4 The Vernacular

Where the direct speech is in English Creole, Walcott uses some creole syntax but generally leaves the pronunciation as standard English. Philoctete’s opening speech is typical of this: ‘This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes.’ (I/i/1) or a little later: ‘So, fists jam in our jacket,/cause the heights was cold and our breath making feathers/like the mist, we pass the rum.’ (I/i/3-4). Though the syntax is dialect,

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<sup>21</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Edward Hirsch, 1977, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, pp. 59-60

<sup>22</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Leif Sjöberg (*Artes No 1* 1983), reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 82

<sup>23</sup> John Thieme, *Derek Walcott*, pp. 17-18.

Walcott does not transliterate any suggestion of vernacular pronunciation. Philoctete says 'them' not 'dem'. The only place where there is a significant departure from this is where ironic imitation of Deep South 'slave-speech' is included (XXXVI/i/14-15).

For comprehensibility again, when Walcott writes French Creole speech, he provides immediate translation into English Creole. Along with this blend of standard English and English Creole, spiced with French Creole, the whole poem achieves a Caribbean oral tone mainly through rhythm and figures of speech, a sort of 'high colloquiality' (Walcott's phrase, in interview with Burnett in 1992).<sup>24</sup> This fits with Walcott's general poetic objective of writing not Shakespearean rhetoric, but in Hemingway's American or Dante's Italian vernacular tone.

He comments to Fumagalli, 'the tonal simplicity of Dante is so twentieth-century, so immediate...the rhythm of it, the vernacular power of it...The really, really astonishing thing in Dante, in fact, is to have a tone that is not rhetorical...what you hear in Dante is man's voice; you don't hear God's voice.'<sup>25</sup> With impeccable logic, he takes this comment further in the text of *Omeros*, for when he has God speak in Achille's head, he gives Him Achille's vernacular: 'Is I send the sea-swift as a pilot,/the swift whose wings is the sign of my crucifixion.' (XXV/i/11).

Walcott's own clarification of 'vernacular' is important to understanding this striving for the tone of the language: 'I mean vernacular in the sense of Hemingway, in terms of voice...I don't mean grammar, diction, language. I mean the immediacy of the

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<sup>24</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 133.

<sup>25</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, p. 278.

voice...'.<sup>26</sup> When Walcott is led through Malebolge by Omeros and they pass the pit of the poets, he sees 'Selfish phantoms with eyes/who wrote with them only, saw only surfaces/in nature and men, and smiled at their similes'... 'And that was where I had come from. Pride in my craft./Elevating myself.' (LVIII/iii/4-5). For 'myself' we might read '*my language*'.

## 10.5 Moderation

Walcott recognises poetry as another dialect. Though the tone of *Omeros* is oral throughout, the language is, except in some of the direct speech, firmly in the poetic dialect. It is allegorical, determinedly metaphorical and musical. While true mimesis is perhaps an unattainable goal, poetry's duty is to speak as clearly as it can, 'a language that went beyond mimicry, a dialect which had the force of revelation as it invented names for things, one which finally settled on its own mode of inflection.'<sup>27</sup> However, this does not lead him so close to the vernacular that he adopts Brathwaite's position on 'nation-language'. He had difficulty with aspects of the negritude tendency of which nation-language was a part. He saw falseness in attempts to adopt a culture from the past that modern West Indians had not experienced.

Brathwaite stresses literature's originally oral nature and the particular appropriateness of the oral form to the Caribbean. What he calls *total expression* grows out of the griot tradition and the poverty of the community, where they only have their breath, their immanence, to express themselves.<sup>28</sup> Walcott said much the same to Ciccarelli: 'West Indian society is within an oral tradition. This is a question of

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<sup>26</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, pp 108 and 278

<sup>27</sup> Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, p 15.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice* (London: New Beacon Books 1984) pp. 18-19.



literacy rather than intelligence...Story-telling, singing, and other forms of tribal entertainment continue with such phenomena as the calypso tents. That tradition is also African'.<sup>29</sup>

He adopted the martyr's role, 'dedicated to purifying the language of the tribe...jumped on by both sides for pretentiousness or playing white.'<sup>30</sup> At the same time, he works to avoid elevating the tone, ironically given his satirical lines in *Epitaph for the Young*: 'We'll drink to any West Indian who/Strips speech of tie and socks.'<sup>31</sup>

Walcott rejects the idea that the vernacular (literally 'of the home-born slave') need be either the fragmentary relics of long-lost African tongues or the imperial speech of the slave-owner and colonist. Callahan suggests creoles are fresh languages, occupying ground that formerly belonged to the empires and subversive by definition.<sup>32</sup> What Walcott is about is producing a creole of creoles, one that can be universally understood and that encompasses not just the various englishes of the Caribbean, but also the vestiges of African dialect that survive,<sup>33</sup> the lilt and tone of French Creole and the richness and freshness of imagery to be found in demotic speech and good poetry everywhere.

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<sup>29</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Sharon Ciccarelli, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Derek Walcott, *Epitaph for the Young* (reprinted in *Agenda Vol. 39 Nos. 1-3*), p. 44.

<sup>32</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection. Derek Walcott's Omeros*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2003) p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> As in 'chac-chac' or 'shack-shack', the rattle, which has a Yoruba equivalent/precursor in 'seke-seke' (Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2003))

## 11. Prosody

### *Shiftiness and heft*

### 11.1 Metre

Walcott has always shown himself ready to adapt conventional forms. As early as his sonnets in 'Tales of the Islands', as well as turning the sonnet structure on its head, he combines lyric and narrative forms in a way that comes to full fruition in *Omeros*.<sup>1</sup>

His prosody is a subtle craft that resists metrical analysis. His motive for this may be guessed at from his comment to Edward Hirsch about his 1984 collection *Midsummer*, 'For a poem, if you give a poem personality, that's the most exciting thing – to feel that it is becoming anti-melodic. The vocabulary becomes even more challenging, the meter more interesting, and so on.'<sup>2</sup>

Commentators on *Omeros* have seen in it a rhyme-driven verse-form and a music of the sea,<sup>3</sup> syllabotonic (sic) verse,<sup>4</sup> a phrasal prosody relying on Aeolic and Sapphic figures,<sup>5</sup> the homemade texture of creole traditions,<sup>6</sup> a wavering rhythm mimicking drunkenness<sup>7</sup> and endless variation, a syncopation.<sup>8</sup> Walcott himself refers to it repeatedly as hexameter and *terza rima*,<sup>9 10</sup> and on one occasion as 'my rough

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Walcott, *In a Green Night*, pp. 26-30 and *Collected Poems*, pp. 22-27.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Edward Hirsch, *The Art of Poetry* (1986), reprinted in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, p. 83.

<sup>3</sup> Brad Leithauser, *Ancestral Rhyme* (New Yorker 66, 11 February 1991), p. 94

<sup>4</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, p. 245.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Benfey, 'Coming Home' (*The New Republic*, 29 October 1990), p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Charles W Pollard, *New World Modernisms: T S Eliot, Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite*, p. 167.

<sup>9</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Luigi Sampietro, *Caribana 3, A Review of Caribbean Literatures*, 1992/93.

<sup>10</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J P White, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 174.

hexameter, which is in Homer and my rough *terza rima*, which is in Dante.<sup>11</sup> He has said, ‘I do not recognise literary devices. I cannot name metres. I am not interested in the nomenclature of Latin scansion. I count on my fingers. Everything else is by accident, and I hope divine’.<sup>12</sup> This impatience with the meta-language of prosody cannot be taken to mean that he is deaf to the patterns that prosody attempts to identify.

With the exception of Chapter XXXIII, Section iii, which is in tetrameter and is discussed separately below, the poem is indeed in (rough) hexameter. This might be seen as moving the verse away from a close dependence on the later, Eurocentric norm of iambic pentameter and towards a ‘purer’ form, closer to classical figures and therefore to the Homeric and oral tradition, more in tune with modern Caribbean rhythmic culture and more distant from the colonial tradition.

However, Walcott has also said he chose the hexameter line because it allowed more freedom than the pentameter to drive the narrative forward, accelerating or relaxing as necessary and that the pentameter was a little conventional and pre-determined. He said, ‘I felt that the prose – the narrative experience in the poem – would’ve had less of a sort of epic echo if it were in hexameter as opposed to if it were in pentameter – in which it would already begin to certainly have echoes of Milton, or Tennyson [...] And I don’t think that the pentameter would’ve allowed me the kind of prosaic space that I wanted for the action of the narration... I think that in the pentametrical measure

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<sup>11</sup> Derek Walcott, *Reflections on ‘Omeros’* ed. Gregson Davis, reprinted in *The Poetics of Derek Walcott: Intertextual Perspectives*, p. 244.

<sup>12</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Leif Sjöberg (*Artes No 1* 1983), reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 82

ordinary things tend to get over-emphasised by the beat – I think. Whereas *here* there is more flexibility, more caesuras.’<sup>13</sup>

Comparing *Omeros* with the pentameter of ‘The Schooner *Flight*’ (1979), the difference in tone is marked. Though the latter is more loosely rhymed, it feels highly compressed, almost hectic. Caesurae are less prominent and much of the sense is end-stopped so that the lines come staccato. Often, the lines hesitate between tetrameter and pentameter, giving strength to Walcott’s comment about the beat. In *Midsummer* (1984) and ‘The Light of the World’ (1987)<sup>14</sup>, Walcott’s pentameter takes a more relaxed form in which any variation in stresses is more often upward.

As Roberts has pointed out, Walcott’s hexameter is by no means the classical Alexandrine of Spenser or Pope, with its prominent and invariable caesura.<sup>15</sup> He applies the hexameter flexibly and it often varies from the 12 syllables/6 stresses of the classic alexandrine. There are 16-syllable lines, even 17-syllable ones in XXVII/i/1 and XXVIII/iii/1, while 4- and 5-stress lines occur fairly frequently, clearly intended to draw attention to a passage (e.g. in II/iii/3). His use of caesurae is examined later in this section but is also far from classical.

This metrical variety can raise problems for the prosodist seeking to apply foot scansion but the unity of the poem is not disturbed by such fluidity.

## 11.2 Form

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<sup>13</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Luigi Sampietro, *Caribana* 3.

<sup>14</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Arkansas Testament*, p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> Neil Roberts, ‘Derek Walcott and English Metre’ (*Agenda* Vol. 39 Nos. 1-3), pp. 271-2.

Just as Walcott's hexameters are seen as Homeric homage, his use of *terza rima* is considered Dantesque, acknowledging the debt the poem owes to Homer and Dante for some of its symbolism and references (Fumagalli points out that *terza rima* was of Dante's invention).<sup>16</sup> Walcott referred to them as 'like a combination of a Homeric line and a Dantesque design.'<sup>17</sup> His claim to be using the *terza rima* form has been accepted by commentators, but is not completely convincing. Breslin says, 'there is no consistent pattern of linking rhyme to bind the tercets together' and calls it 'a loose approximation of Dante's tightly woven *terza rima*.'<sup>18</sup> The apparent variety is accepted; Dante, too, extended the form with additional rhymes. No-one seems to have realised that the form Walcott uses is unique to himself and much more regular than it seems at first sight.

Of his *terza rima*, Walcott has said, 'quatrains wouldn't have been as good because the quatrain is too self-completing. It doesn't give you a propulsion into the next stanza like the *terza-rima* does...Rhyme is a propulsion...It pushes. It doesn't stop.'<sup>19</sup> However, he had also said in 1986, only a year or so before beginning *Omeros*, 'I find myself wanting to write very simply cut, very contracted, very speakable and very challenging quatrains in rhymes. Any other shape seems ornate, an elaboration on that essential cube that really is the poem.'<sup>20</sup> Much of *The Arkansas Testament*, published in 1987, is written in rhyming quatrains and in his play *The Odyssey*, written in 1991/2, shortly after *Omeros* was published, Walcott reverted to the quatrain, staying with it (as pairs of couplets) in *Tiepolo's Hound* in 2000.

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<sup>16</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular*, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Luigi Sampietro, *Caribana* 3.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, p. 245.

<sup>19</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Luigi Sampietro, *Caribana* 3.

<sup>20</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Edward Hirsch, quoted in *The Art of Poetry XXXVII*, *Paris Review* 101 (1986), pp 196-230 and cited by Rei Terada in *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry*, p. 176.

Walcott combines formality with a relaxed virtuosity that conceals the form at times. Even so, we might have expected the characteristic *terza rima* rhyme pattern of *aba/bcb/cdc* to appear before Stanzas 9-10 of *Omeros*. We certainly might expect to have more than three or four isolated examples in the whole of Chapter One and the same in Chapter Two. Less than 6% of these two chapters is in what Dante might have called *terza rima*.

Overall, even including Walcott's inventive use of reverse *terza rima*, (where the rhyming is not *aba/bcb* but *aba/cac/dcd*, see XXX/ii/1-2) or interlocking *terza rima* (where the rhyming is *aba/bab*, see XXXVIII/i/1-2 and also 3-4) the form is used in only 200 stanzas or so, less than 10% of the poem. Though there are fragments in the form of individual tercet-pairs, these rarely extend beyond that, the longest passage being IX/ii/2-9, where two normal *terza rima* groups bracket four examples of the reverse form.

The dominant form in *Omeros* is in fact the regularly rhyming quatrain, but this has been concealed by dividing the lines into groups of three rather than four.

There are some 1100 quatrains, spread over a tercet skeleton and occupying some 1500 stanzas, maybe 60% of the poem. Sustained passages are frequent and lengthy. This rhyme scheme is one that Walcott used 20 years earlier in his poem 'The Gulf'<sup>21</sup> but did not use again until *Omeros*. That none of the commentators has remarked upon this feature of Walcott's rhyming in *Omeros* is indicative of the success of this

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<sup>21</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Gulf and Other Poems*, p. 27.

technique and of his use of near-rhyme in concealing regularity. He used the same scheme in the first section of his next volume of new poetry, *The Bounty*, in 1997.

Though he sought the *terza rima* form for *Omeros*, his inclination both before and after 1987-1989 when it was being written was towards quatrains and he never really relinquished them. By spreading rhyming quatrains over tercets in *Omeros*, Walcott achieves his aim of rhyme driving across stanza boundaries, but retains the quatrain element he was inclining towards in 1986.

It is interesting that his comment on writing *The Odyssey* could almost apply to *Omeros* as well: 'I was not going to do it in pentameter because that would have had Elizabethan echoes. I made up my mind I would do it in quatrains, for the discipline and containment of it, that I would do it in hexameters, and that what I was after was a huge poem.'<sup>22</sup>

### 11.3 Classical Metrics

What is to be made of Walcott's disclaimer, mentioned earlier, of any interest in 'Latin scansion'? Callahan, in particular, has found many instances of apparently classical forms. However, after some fifty pages of detailed analysis in which he finds numerous examples of choriambes, amphibrachs, dochmiacs etc., he devotes a single page to the possibility that the prosody might be 'meant to subsume indigenous cultural forms of the Caribbean' and points to Walcott's mention of Homer's own 'Greek calypso' (LVII/i/12). He opens the possibility that Walcott might here, as in

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<sup>22</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Old Bard Teaches a New Spell*, (BBC Radio 3, London, June 26, 1992) cited in Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 154.

other respects, be 'making it new', in the Poundian sense.<sup>23</sup> Listening to Walcott reading passages from the poem encourages this latter view, rather than the classical one.<sup>24</sup>

The key characteristic of the metre in *Omeros* is variety. The rhythms are often ternary, almost calypsonian, and are only occasionally regular for even a single line. Callahan finds repetition of particular figures provides cohesion among the variety.<sup>25</sup> He sees frequent use of choriamb, amphibrach and dochmiac groupings and has identified recurring patterns that form a kind of motif for the poem. He sees an explanation for some of the greatest apparent irregularities in the possibility that the verse form there is Aeolic four-syllable trimeter, e.g. three choriamb in I/i/13: 'over its lost|name, when the hunched|island was called.'<sup>26</sup> However, here and in other places he ignores sense boundaries in identifying a classical form. In recordings, Walcott reads that line with a strong caesura that conflicts with Callahan's reading.<sup>27</sup> The importance Walcott attaches to the caesura in influencing metre is mentioned later in this section.

There are many possible choriamb, at least a dozen in the opening section. Callahan finds five in the first four tercets and within these, he notes the Adonic shape of 'smiles for the tourists', 'jam in our jacket', 'give us the spirit'. He finds many more as he analyses the rest of the poem, usually with a preceding or succeeding unstressed

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<sup>23</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 54.

<sup>24</sup> Derek Walcott reads a selection of his own work: *Collected Poems 1948-84 & Omeros* (Argo, PolyGram Records double cassette, Catalogue No 522 222 4)

<sup>25</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 15.

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*Derek Walcott Reads: includes excerpts from Omeros, the Odyssey and his Collected Poems* (New York: Caedmon Audio single cassette, Harper Collins ISBN 0-69451-460-8)

*Derek Walcott Reading from his Poems* (The Poetry Archive CD, ISBN 978-1-906324-05-6)



syllable, and says these appear as discrete syntactic units, not as random portions of the line.<sup>28</sup> However, Walcott's reading tends to group adjacent pairs of stressed syllables together, which prevents the first two of these three being seen as discrete. Their groups as he reads them are 'Philoctete smiles | for the tourists' and 'So, fists jam | in our jacket'. Also, the last example could more easily be read as part of a four-dactyl line, 'give us the | spirit to | turn into | murderers'.

This is not in itself an argument against a classical theory and does not refute all of Callahan's analysis, but makes the points that he overplays the classical figures at times and, more importantly, that reading the lines on the page loses what is key to the metrics, the Caribbean orality of the work and the specific influence of a St Lucian delivery. Walcott has written a Caribbean metre with occasional classical references, rather than the reverse.

There are places where the classical metre seems to be knowingly used. In some cases, choriambes are used because the rhythm fits the sense of the line (e.g. XXIV/i/3 and 7 where 'widening the joy' and 'This was his garden' express Achille's opening spirit). The amphibrachic rhythm with which his Narrator pronounces 'Omeros' (II/iii/3-5) is a motif that recurs in telling phrases, in feelings: 'I'm tired of America' (II/iii/7), or in the Narrator's epiphany: 'the stroke of one spidery palm on a cloud's page/an asterisk only. Achille with his cutlass' (LIX/i/2).

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<sup>28</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 8.

Though Callahan sees a possible amphibrach in I/i/3 'the trees have to die. So' and speculates that Walcott is deliberately using amphibrachic metre,<sup>29</sup> a better metric reading of this particular passage may be dochmiac, with emphatic stress on 'have', given its strong emotional content, and this is how Walcott reads it in recordings.<sup>30</sup>

Elsewhere, Callahan points to the use of other dochmiac figures, particularly in the African section, with XX/iii/19 'and you, nameless son' and XXVII/iii/11-12 'with skinned, yellow teeth' and 'from the locked hand, and then' and XXVII/iii/16-17 'with its own piercing chain. He fell hard and saw/the leaves pinned with stars'.<sup>31</sup> Other examples may be found in VII/i/8 and 16 where Helen and Achille fight. As in classical Greek, this comes at moments of extreme agitation.

Callahan notes that the first time perfect iambic hexameter appears coincides with the first specifically classical allusion (I/ii/2 line3). Also that while I/ii/1-16 consists of 48 decasyllabic lines, I/ii/17-20 has only 3 lines out of 12 of that length. He speculates that this may be to reflect the transformation being undergone by the trees.<sup>32</sup>

Elsewhere, in I/i/4 line 3 Walcott introduces a perfect dactylic tetrameter line 'give us the spirit to turn into murderers' that catches the swing of the axe and/or the starting of the chain saw and in II/ii/14, he switches into a classical anacreontic metre when

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<sup>29</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Derek Walcott reads a selection of his own work: *Collected Poems 1948-84 & Omeros* (Argo, PolyGram Records double cassette, Catalogue No 522 222 4)

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<sup>31</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>32</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, pp. 16-18.

invoking Omeros, 'with the conch's moan, Omeros', as he will again in Stanza 22 'of a girl's throat, Omeros'. Both lines use the amphibrachic stressing of 'Omeros' spelled out in II/iii/3-4, rather than the dactylic one used in modern Greek and in II/iii/1. The anacreontic form appears in LXIV/ii/7, where it serves as a classical counterpoint to the reader being urged to abandon classical metaphor: 'or just think, "What a fine local woman!" and her'.

These instances support Callahan's contention that, in a reversal of traditional metrical practice, Walcott is restricting the use of the strictest metres to the most crucial lines.<sup>33</sup> The deliberate use of classical metrics to point up key passages is entirely in keeping with Walcott's method. He plays similar tricks with form. In IX/ii/1-9 he uses form to show the storm turning everything upside down. After an opening quatrain of rhymes followed by a conventional *terza rima* group, the waves in stanza 3 turn everything to the reverse *terza rima* form *aba cac dcd* etc (afraid/boat/about, weight/white/wet, oar/ashore/more, under/thunder/founder). Only when Hector regains control in stanza 8 does the *terza rima* return to normal (while/wall/will).

The reader is repeatedly wrong-footed in his expectations of the metre. Walcott speaks of Emily Dickinson's 'slant of light' being 'a figure of irregular scansion within the frame of the window of the poem [stilling] the human subject... into vacancy and reflection'.<sup>34</sup> In *Omeros*, it is the appearance of regular, rather than irregular, scansion that gives the reader pause for reflection. What may appear chaotic, tropical, in its rich metres proves to be deliberately structured.

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<sup>33</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Road Taken in What the Twilight Says: Essays*, p. 204.

Brathwaite pointed out that the calypso employs dactyls.<sup>35</sup> Any sustained writing using ternary rhythms, where pairs of unstressed syllables abound, is likely to throw up matches to such classical forms as adonics, aeolics, anacreontics or choriambes. However, though Walcott is conscious above all of the effect of his rhythms and introduces a classical metre where it is appropriate, it is less sure that he is following a specifically classical metric project. Too often, a more extensive classical reading depends on ignoring additional unstressed syllables, or supplying missing ones. Also, the classical forms do not always fit with syntactical units as closely as Callahan suggests, and his syntactic reading often depends on splitting pairs of stressed syllables when Walcott reads them together.

There is also a programmatic objection to the idea that Walcott is engaged in a major use of classical metres. Such a project would work against his approach to metaphor in the poem, where he seeks to leave behind ‘all that Greek manure’ and portray the islanders as they are. Callahan recognises this when he points out that a post-colonial text operates in a politically charged theatre and that Walcott ‘could not follow too closely the templates provided by the imperial tradition.’ He suggests that the choice of classical metres, by going back to formative figures that pre-date the imperial tradition, actually supports Walcott’s project of moving beyond the colonial influences: ‘By implementing these ancient meters, Walcott is colluding with an oral tradition as much as a literate one, and once again positioning *Omeros* in the space between two apparently Manichean options.’<sup>36</sup> However, there is another possibility,

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, pp. 51- 52.

one that fits better with Walcott's vision of the islands as a place for making new. He may be using specifically Caribbean rhythms.

Callahan recognises the similarities between rhythms in *Omeros* and the Caribbean cadences of *kaiso*. He points out that the liberal use of amphibrachs produces a cadence that mimics syncopation, a feature that *kaiso* employs without exception. Also that *kaiso*'s continual emendation of the beat is quite like the prosodic technique at work in *Omeros*.<sup>37</sup> It is possible, given Walcott's stated aversion to classical metrics, that his programmatic decision was a political one, an attempt to avoid aligning the work too closely to the Eurocentric tradition. It is equally possible that his decision was made for him by another choice he had already made, which was that he would write in a version of English Creole and in a tone that was natural to the islands.

He developed a characteristically fluid metre that needs to be heard in order to fully appreciate its form. It contains many double or even triple unstressed syllables and pairs of stressed syllables, together giving cadenced rhythms natural to the speech of the islands and avoiding the metronomic binary rhythms of iambic/trochaic verse. These produce what could be seen as ternary metres close to classical (i.e. pre-Western) oral tradition, a parallel he will have been happy to play upon, given his Homeric theme. From there, it would be easy to use classical figures as an occasional emphatic device.

#### 11.4 Phrasal Prosody

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<sup>37</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 53.

Walcott has said that he wanted the feel of great prose rather than a strong verse line.<sup>38</sup> Cadenced rhythms rather than repeating ones, phrases that break over line ends and sentences that run on for several tercets at a time all contribute to a flow that rides across the frequently light rhyming. There are some two dozen rhyme types (see Appendix A) and most of them are some distance from the full masculine rhyme that engages the ear most easily. Apocopated or anagrammatic rhymes, eye rhymes and rhymes on unstressed syllables all help to push the rhyming into the background. He generally avoids that most insistent poetic voice, the rhymed couplet, except at the ends of sections and, of course, in section XXXIII/iii.

St Lucian patois is French in origin and Walcott's English Creole has a strong French rhythm and syntax (see III/iii/9 or XX/ii/6-11). Callahan says the 'syntax of the poem provides perhaps the best guide to understanding the work's prosody' and he supports the idea of a phrasal prosody depending on word group cadences, pointing out that this is a feature of French prosody.<sup>39</sup>

Certainly, Walcott's cadences make a phrasal reading more appropriate than foot prosody. Further, beyond the phrase/sentence level, both rhythm and rhyme also obey a paragraphic grouping, with changes in metre or breaks in the *terza rima*/'quatrain' rhyme sequences at sense boundaries.

Some of this will be due to episodic and out-of-sequence composition, as Walcott himself has mentioned in respect of rhyme:

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<sup>38</sup> D. J. R. Bruckner, in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, p. 398.

<sup>39</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, pp. 21 and 14.

... if you write some sections later, to connect it like a long domino  
backwards, sometimes if a rhyme is missing I regret it. But very often there is  
either something approximating rhyme, or... Like an internal rhyme, maybe.  
Quite close.<sup>40</sup>

However, there are many examples of true paragraphic style. For example, I/i/5, I/i/7,  
I/i/11 and I/i/22 all show breaks in the rhyme sequence that match the development of  
ideas. LV/i/8 and LV/i/15 are similar. In conversation with Bruckner, Walcott spoke  
of finding in Conrad and Kipling 'the wit of the paragraph; mentally, it keeps the  
rhythm up...'.<sup>41</sup>

### 11.5 Caesurae

Speaking of how the poem came to take shape, Walcott talked of relying on the  
phrase rather than the sentence. 'The metre of the poem would be dictated by the  
extent of the phrase that comes to mind – how many beats it has past the caesura. The  
poem doesn't begin in front of the caesura, it begins in the second half of the  
caesura...What is audible in a line is a remembered half of a forgotten preceding  
beat.'<sup>42</sup>

Most of the poem uses the single caesura per line, moving it with complete flexibility  
so that there is no sense of regularity. However, the hexameter line is long enough to

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<sup>40</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Luigi Sampietro, *Caribana* 3

<sup>41</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by D. J. R. Bruckner, *A Poem in Homage to an Unwanted Man* (New York Times, Oct 9, 1990) quoted by Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's Omeros*, p. 35.

<sup>42</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J. P. White 1990, *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 164.

permit more than one caesura and Walcott frequently drops into a double caesural form. He uses double or occasionally triple caesurae to present us with a series of clauses in a succinct form, stripped of superfluous syntax. So XLIX/iii/9, 'My braceleted Circe/was gone, like the shining drizzle, far now, at sea.' and XLII/ii/1, 'November. Sober month. The leaves' fling was over.' and XLII/i/12, 'Snow brightened the linen, the pepper, salt domes, the gables/of the napkin, silencing Warsaw, feathering quiet Crackow;'.

He also does so in his dialogue passages with his mother (XXXII/i/11-15) or with Omeros (LVI/iii/12-14) or between Afolabe and Achille (XXV/iii/6-9), where it gives a theatrical immediacy to the voices. Incomplete sentences rely on context to make their sense clear and are colloquial in tone if not in vocabulary. He uses the double caesura in the passage with Omeros (LVI/iii/12-13), setting out the conversation on the page in a descending form that mimics playfully the descent of the goat-track.

## 11.6 Humour

There are many examples of such playfulness in the way form, rhyme and rhythm are deployed, as should be expected in a Caribbean 'epic'. The folk culture of calypso/*kaiso* depends on playful rhyme and flexible rhythm. Sir Philip Sherlock, commenting on a Walcott image, said. 'The last image is perfect Trinidad calypsonian. [...] his gift for "taking bad somet'ing mek laugh" reveals his Caribbean mind better than a thousand hosannahs.'<sup>43</sup> Burnett comments that '[r]elish of the

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<sup>43</sup> Sir Philip Sherlock, *Foreword: Caribbean Quarterly* Vol. 38, no. 4 (Kingston: University of the West Indies, December 1992), p. viii.



comedy of language is a Walcott hallmark'.<sup>44</sup> Walcott himself said, 'if the speech were not interesting – if the convolutions, the dictions, the novelty and the sounds were not alive, it would not produce writers.'<sup>45</sup>

He spoke approvingly of the idea of fun in poetry and language, when, instead of Melville or Hemingway, 'I picked up the Betjeman, and I began to read it, and I was reading it with *complete* delight and much more respect and fun, you know, than all the other guys on the shelves – very few of them have any fun...And Auden also had a lot of fun. That's the great thing about Auden, there's a lot of humo[u]r, a lot of wit, and a lot of fun.'<sup>46</sup>

Aural and visual tricks abound. He often uses an eye or sight rhyme where the rhyme word involves seeing or blindness (see I/i/2-3, II/ii/17, III/ii/5, IV/iii/6). He even invents a variation on the eye rhyme which only works if you match one of the rhyme words to a missing heteronym (e.g. *Troust/troughs/ prow*s via the missing '*boughs*' (I/ii/19-20)), using this device several times. At XXIV/ii/13-21 Walcott produces an almost unbroken 27 lines of rhymes with a liquid 'L' sound to reflect stasis and the slop of waves against an idle boat. At XIII/iii/7 he speaks of rhyme as parentheses, then uses a palindromic rhythm four times to mimic the image ('like those groaning women | will you achieve that height' etc). He might even be 'rhyming' the words 'elbow' and 'Pyrenees' ('knees'! See note to XXIX/iii/10-16).

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<sup>44</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 149.

<sup>45</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Nancy Schoenberger, 1983, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p.91.

<sup>46</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by William Baer 1993, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 201.

Onomatopoeia, usually through alliteration, is frequent. There is also a form of visual pun (see the section on Metaphor for a discussion of Walcott's verbal puns) in passages where Walcott mimics sense through the physical appearance of the letters. For example, see I/i/22 where the letters 'l', then 'u', 'w' and 'v' represent the falling masts and the troughs of the waves. In LVIII/ii/7 he writes 'the 'l' is a mast', the letter forming a mast to the ship of the line (an absent pun) it appears in, but with the next words 'a desk is a raft' the person writing is both the 'l' and the mast, the desk is the (c)raft (we cannot avoid Walcott's favourite metaphor here). Now other meanings of the metaphor kick in and we see the desk keeping the ego afloat 'foaming with paper', both sea-like and furious.

In III/ii/1, the repeated 'g', 'b' and 'd' mimic the curlicues of gingerbread on balconies and gables. Above all, the repeated 'horned island' not only uses a visual pun in 'horned', it is almost a visual palindrome as well.

In Burnett's words, '[a]t every level, Walcott's approach to language is ludic: the play of the signifier across meanings and discourses is endlessly surprising and rich. In the first instance he savours the quiddity of a word, its sound when voiced and its pattern when written. His verse often incorporates concrete poetry.'<sup>47</sup>

### 11.7 Section XXXIII/iii

Section XXXIII/iii is stark in its difference and demands separate consideration. It is the only section in the poem to use tetrameter and regular rhyming couplets. One

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<sup>47</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 147.

reason for this is that this is an intensely personal passage dealing with Walcott's mental turmoil at the failure of his marriage and his resulting loneliness, outside his wider tale but central to his feelings while writing it.

Callahan noted that initially it falls into quatrains, with couplets 1 and 2, and then 3 and 4 sharing an 8/8/7/8 rhythm because of the virtual offbeats on lines 1,2 and 4 in each 'quatrain'.<sup>48</sup> His reading from there on concentrates on irregularities and the difficulty of being certain of the scansion and he abandons his quatrain idea too early. If he had continued, he would have found that it is possible to find regularity within the remaining quatrains, though the pattern established is changing throughout.

Appendix B gives detailed analysis of a possible reading in which the section falls not into quatrains as Callahan noted, but into four 'octets', each consisting of a regular but new pattern of closing offbeats, followed by an *envoi* of a single couplet. This structure is supported by the rhyme pattern, which shows strong similarities within each 'octet' in the opening and closing rhymes: *fear/air/door/roar*, *sin/in/seven/heaven*, *curse/verse/bear/everywhere* and *kind/mind/and/hand*. This demonstrates fearsome attention to detail, something further consideration of the final couplet 17 must underline. The lines of that final couplet are the thirty-third and thirty-fourth in the section, and fall at the junction between Chapters XXXIII and XXXIV.

Walcott chose this particular place for this crucial departure from the normal pattern because of its numerological significance.

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<sup>48</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, pp. 33-38.

## 11.8 Numerology

Though Chapter XXXIII Section iii is not the centre of the book (the middle passage, if you will, which falls at Chapter XXXIII Section i, and whose numerological significance was noted by Callahan)<sup>49</sup>, the reason here is again a numerological one. In highlighting the section, Walcott continues his homage to Dante, whose use of the number three has been commented on by Ferrante, ‘the scheme of three interlocking rhymes and their relation to the Trinity is by now a truism.’<sup>50</sup> Dante introduced the number three in many ways – three beasts, three mouths of Satan, three sinners in a wheel, the three books of the Comedy, three rivers, *terza rima* and so on.

Yet in section XXXIII/iii, Walcott moves away from hexametric tercets and Dante’s *terza rima*, confirming his tendency throughout the prosody to establish and then confound expectations. If he was seeking an alternative to a scheme based on threes, one based on two/four/eight seems natural enough and has the possible virtue of being the other leg of the Platonic *lambda* series of the Pythagoreans. According to this series, the numbers 1,2,4,8 and 1,3,9,27 ‘constitute the ‘world soul’, the cause of the reasonable, circular motions of the heavenly bodies.’<sup>51</sup>

Apart from one or two small and isolated cases referred to in the Annotations,

Walcott’s venture into numerology concentrates on multiples of the number 3. The

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<sup>49</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 125

<sup>50</sup> Joan Ferrante, ‘A Poetics of Chaos and Harmony’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff. (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 162.

<sup>51</sup> Christopher Butler, ‘Numerological Thought’ in *Silent Poetry: Essays in Numerological Analysis* ed. by Alastair Fowler (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 4.

number has the added resonance for Walcott and his themes that it was the Triangular Trade that first brought African slaves to the Caribbean. At the structural level of the poem, as well as in the verse itself, Walcott marches to Dante's triple-beating drum.

Walcott refers explicitly in XVII/i/2 to 'the battle's numerological poetry', but the clues begin to appear in the first line, divided into 3, 3 and 6 syllables 'This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes', and, of course, in the tercet form and the predominance of ternary metre. The patterning persists through to LXIV/iii, the final section of the poem, which has 33 lines.

Callahan drew attention to the preponderance of three:

'Fourteen of the forty two lines [in section II/iii], exactly one third, have catalectic endings, while nine of the remaining twenty-eight lines end with choriamb. There are also three anacreontic lines in this section, and three apparently irregular lines which may be divided into trimeter. In the midst of a somewhat chaotic prosodic scheme, unifying features abound.'<sup>52</sup>

In his note to this passage, Callahan also points out that Chapter XXXIII section iii is the only one not in tercets, and:

'Each chapter is divided into three sections. The longest sections contain thirty-three tercets. There are three such sections. The shortest section

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<sup>52</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 21.

contains three tercets. Chapter III, section iii has thirty-three lines, as does the thirty third section and Chapter XXXIII, section i, the midpoint of the poem.'

Callahan went on to find threes in the plots and characters and in other aspects of the poem.

Further to this numerology, Walcott may be counting individual words, aiming at multiples of 3.

In considering whether this is more than random, we find from word-counting that all of the main characters' names, including those of the island itself, occur a multiple of three times.<sup>53</sup> Clearly, in any selection of words, one in three might be expected to occur a multiple of three times. Randomly, therefore, six of these eighteen names might have been expected to fit this pattern.

However, the chance of all the characters who play a part in the story fitting this pattern is highly unlikely and we are led to conclude that this is deliberate on Walcott's part.

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<sup>53</sup> The counts of names include all references to the individual, including those with apostrophe 's', e.g. the Major's count includes 'Major' and 'Major's' but not 'major' where it does not refer to him. The (RSM) Plunkett count excludes 'Plunkett' where that name refers to Midshipman Plunkett or to Maud Plunkett. Epithets used for Achilles, Helen, Hector and Ma Kilman have been included in their counts and no distinction is made between the Greek and the St Lucian, e.g. Achille and Achilles. Plurals (Helens, Achillesees, Hectors, Plunketts) are excluded.

Omeros	21
Seven Seas	39
Achille/Achilles/ 'tamer of horses' (XXIV/ii/27)/Homeros (XXX/ii/6)	168
Hector/ 'road warrior' (XLV/iii/4)	66
Helen/ 'filly of Menelaus' (VI/ii/2)	93
Philoctete/Philoctetes	72
Ma Kilman/ 'caverned prophetess' (XLVIII/ii/1)	30
Plunkett/the RSM	39
The Major (another name for Plunkett)	33
Dennis (another name for Plunkett)	9
Maud	84
(Midshipman) Plunkett	6
Mama	3
Warwick	3
Maljo/Didier/Statics/Professor Static	24
Lawrence	6
Afolabe	9
Iounalao/Hewannorra	9

Table 11.8.1 Frequency of occurrence of names in *Omeros*

There is no evidence in the poem or the commentators that Walcott holds particular beliefs about numerology, but certainly, once committed to using the number 3 in homage to Dante, he seems to have played with names enthusiastically.

Beyond this, other words of particular significance in the story also divide by three:

‘Wound’ (the damaged self) 39

‘Home’ (the seat of warmth and love, excluding the Marian Home) 39

‘Door’/ ‘doorway’ (the way from one world to another, change) 42

‘Canoe’ (the traditional, sustainable way of life) 42

‘Name’ (symbol of the lost African inheritance) 63

(‘Names’ is also divisible, at 27)

‘Sore’ (the site and evidence of the wound) 12

‘Eden’ (The perfect place, the place where all remains possible, St Lucia) 9

‘Memory’ (The place where the wound is greatest, the seat of identity) 27

‘Ants’ (The messengers from the African past who carry the secrets of the cure) 24

‘Nation’ (The group, bound by common suffering) 6

‘Dialect’ (The language made personal to a place) 6

‘Khaki’ (The colour that is neither black nor white, the ideal compromise) 18

‘history’/ ‘History’ (the past, particularly the past as dominated by Empire) 48

‘Sunrise’ (opportunity, potential) 27

Though it again might seem that adherence to multiples of three lies outside the bounds of coincidence and that some if not all of these have been the result of



Walcott's counting, there is no certainty. In counting these and a further 25 less significant words that have also been found that meet the condition, a further 60 or more were checked that did not. It is therefore safest to assume that, names apart, the counts divisible by three are a result of chance.

## 12. Conclusion

### *Happily ever after*

With *Omeros*, Walcott has given St Lucia and its people a place in literary atlases larger than simple geography would merit. He has shown how myth persists in the ordinary and linked his island directly to the roots of Western civilisation, by-passing and making less influential the shameful history of exploitation by empire.

His vision includes an inclusive society in which all races blend and work in harmony with nature. Moral values are practical and tolerant, rather than based on religious rigidity and prejudice. Commercialism is a fact to be lived with but not an idol to be worshipped. He sets compromises St Lucians must make, in order to survive, against the eternal values – the nurturing sea, the promise of sunrise, the power of love and comradeship, the simple rituals of work and home that give life shape and meaning.

As a poetic work, *Omeros* sustains its narrative drive and lyric power. It places itself in the canon through homage to Homer and Dante and extensive references to other writers, yet is original in its form. It is complex in its prosody, always attentive to meaning in its use of metre and rhyme. It is both serious and highly ludic, and shows Creole tone and inflection to be capable of sustained literary use.

This study has drawn in commentary from across the critical literature, to provide some sense of other views on Walcott's writing, and has included as many as possible of Walcott's own comments on *Omeros* and on the writer's task. It presents new conclusions about some aspects of the poem:

- It challenges the prevailing view that the work is written substantially in a variation of *terza rima* and draws attention to the predominance of regular quatrains.
- It demonstrates ways in which the metrics follow the sense of the narrative and takes a more balanced position on the use of classical versus Caribbean metrics than that put forward previously.
- It provides a new rationale for the structure of the significant Chapter XXX Section iii.
- It develops further the idea of his dualism and his use of pairing and contradiction as a dialectical method.
- It shows how there is a paragraphic structure to the verse.
- It takes Walcott's recognised use of numerology further, into word counting of the names of characters.
- It defines his wide use of paronomasia and shows how many of the puns have a metaphorical aspect, beyond mere word-play.
- It analyses some of Walcott's symbolism.
- It traces some of Walcott's imagery or references to his earlier works and to some thirty other writers, and suggests homage to Hemingway and Heaney.
- It analyses over 1000 references in the text, providing sources and explanations.
- It provides the first complete analysis of Walcott's rhyme types in *Omeros*.

A broad study such as this can only sketch in some of the issues and leave them for more focussed investigations. Like the sea, the work of understanding *Omeros* is still going on.

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## Appendix A      Rhyme types used in *Omeros*

Each rhyme has been classified according to its stress relationship and its degree of closeness. They may be further described according to their position in the line.

### Identification by stress

#### *Masculine*

The rhyme is on the final syllable in each line, which is a strongly stressed syllable.

who set out to found no cities; they were the found,  
who were bound for no victories, they were the bound,  
who levelled nothing before them, they were the ground.  
(IV/ii/5)

#### *Feminine*

The rhyme is on the final strongly stressed syllable in each line, which will not be the last syllable (otherwise it is a masculine rhyme).

Next he heard warriors rushing towards battle,  
but it was wind lifting the dead yams, the rattle  
of a palm's shaken spears. Herdsmen haieing cattle  
(IV/ii/4)

***Triple***

The rhyme is on the strongly stressed syllable and two subsequent unstressed ones.

**we swayed together in that metamorphosis  
that cannot tell one body from the other one,  
where a barrier reef is vaulted by white horses,  
  
by a stone breakwater which the old slaves had built.  
They joined with the slithery coupling of porpoises,  
(VII/iii/4-5)**

***Apocopated***

The rhyme is on stressed syllables, one in the ‘feminine’ position (i.e. not at line end), the other at ‘masculine’ position.

**like the rest of them. The corner box, and the heat on  
his hands would make him shift his box to the shade.  
Ma Kilman saw Philoctete hobbling up the street  
(III/ii/10)**

***Light***

The rhyme is between a strongly stressed syllable and a syllable with secondary stress.

**In you the seeds of grey almonds guessed a tree’s shape,  
and the grape leaves rusted like serrated islands,  
and the blind lighthouse, sensing the edge of a cape,  
  
paused like a giant, a marble cloud in its hands,  
(II/ii/18)**

***Wrenched***

The rhyme is between a strongly stressed syllable and an unstressed one.

**The bearded elders endured the decimation  
of their tribe without uttering a syllable  
of that language they had uttered as one nation,  
  
the speech taught their saplings: from the towering babble  
(I/ii/5-6)**

***Unstressed/***

The rhyme is on syllables neither of which is strongly stressed.

***Weakly stressed***

**its pain down the stalls, the curled heads of cabbages  
  
crammed on a tray to please implacable Caesars,  
slaves head-down on a hook, the gutted carcasses  
(VII/i/2-3)**

**Identification by closeness**

***Identical***

The rhyme words are identical.

**their own brothers in rage, but the madman who tore  
Achille's undershirt from one shoulder also tore  
at his heart. The rage he felt against Hector  
(III/i/11)**

***Rich***

The rhyme words or syllables are homophones.

**one fist, then with the other tightening the rein  
  
and narrowing the circle. The sky cracked asunder  
and a forked tree flashed, and suddenly that black rain  
(XLIV/i/6-7)**

***Perfect***

The rhyme is exact on the stressed syllables and all that follow.

***(or Full)***

The bearded elders endured the decimation  
of their tribe without uttering a syllable  
of that language they had uttered as one nation,  
  
the speech taught their saplings: from the towering babble  
of the cedar to green vowels of *bois-campêche*.  
The *bois-flot* held its tongue with the *laurier-cannelle*,  
  
the red-skinned logwood endured the thorns in its flesh,  
while the Aruacs' patois crackled in the smell  
(I/ii/5-7)

***Imperfect***

The rhyme is close but not exact.

***(or Slant***

***or Near)***

It would boil but not scream like a bosun's whistle  
  
to let him know it was ready. He heard the dog's  
morning whine under the boards of the house, its tail  
thudding to be let in, but he envied the pirogues  
(II/ii/3-4)

***Assonant***

The rhyme is on the vowel sounds while the consonants differ.

already miles out at sea. Then he heard the first breeze  
washing the sea-almond's wares; last night there had been  
a full moon white as his plate. He saw with his ears.  
(II/ii/5)

***Consonant***

The rhyme is on the consonants while the vowel sounds differ.

Shortly after, she moved in with Hector. She moved  
everything while he was fishing but a hairpin  
stuck in her soap-dish. To him this proved  
  
that she would come back. Stranger things than that happen  
(XXII/i/1-2)

***Eye or Sight***

The rhyme is a sight one based on similar spelling, although the sounds are different.

set out, muttering the dark language of the blind,  
gnarled hands on his stick, his ears as sharp as the dog's.  
  
Sometimes he would sing and the scraps blew on the wind  
(III/ii/5-6)

***Anagrammatic***

The rhyme is based on the same or similar letters, but in a different order so that none of the other categories above applies.

With the stunned summer going, with the barrel-organ  
oaks, the fiddles of gnats, with the surrendering groan  
of a carousel  
(XXXIII/i/1)

**Identification by position**

***End***

The rhyme words appear at the end of the lines, as in all the above examples.

***Internal***

One or more of the rhyme words appear in positions other than at the end of the lines.

with the arrogant sway of that hip, stern high in the line  
of the turned liner. Maud stood, enraged, in the sun.  
(XXIII/iii/24)

***Caesural***

The rhyme words occur before the caesura in separate lines.

**‘This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes’.  
Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking  
his soul with their cameras. ‘Once wind bring the news  
(I/i/1)**

***Leonine***

The rhyme is on the word before the caesura and the one  
at the end of the same line.

**everything right and exact, everything correct  
(LV/i/1)  
  
or whose sword severed whose head in the *Iliad*.  
(LIX/i/12, two caesurae, with a leonine rhyme at each)**

**Additional characteristics**

***Broken***

The rhyme extends over two or more words.

**the trees have to die. So, fists jam in our jacket,  
  
cause the heights was cold and our breath making feathers  
like the mist, we pass the rum. When it came back, it  
give us the spirit to turn into murderers.  
(I/i/3-4)**

***Macaronic***

The rhyme includes words from more than one language.

**terns, royal and bridled, wild ducks, migrating teal,  
pipers (their fledgling beaks), wild waterfowl, widgeon,  
*Cypseloides Niger*, *l’hirondelle des* *Antilles*  
(XVI/ii/6)**

***Split***

The rhyme is formed by splitting a word at line end.

like a child, steered his brow into the right current,  
as calm as *In God We Troust* to that other world,  
and his flexed palm enclosed an oar with the ident-  
  
ical closure of a mouth around its own name,  
(XLIX/ii/4)

***Heteronym***

The rhyme does not exist until one of the rhyme words is replaced by a heteronym.

When he smiled at Achille's canoe, *In God We Troust*,  
Achille said: "Leave it! Is God' spelling and mine."  
After Mass one sunrise the canoes entered the troughs  
  
of the surpliced shallows, and their nodding prows  
agreed with the waves to forget their lives as trees;  
(I/ii/19-20)  
(**'troughs'** is pronounced 'troffs' and does not rhyme,  
but its heteronym 'boughs' would. Similar to Eye rhyme)

***Meaning***

The rhyme is based on meaning, not sound.

a Sephardic merchant, bag locked in one elbow,  
crouched by a Lisbon dock, and in that position  
  
was reborn in the New World: Lima; Curaçao.  
A snow-headed Negro froze in the Pyrenees,  
(XXIX/iii/11-12)  
(Walcott has substituted 'Pyrenees' for the historically-correct  
'Jura', so that he can achieve a pun on 'knees' and make this a  
body-part 'rhyme' with 'elbow'. 'Pyrenees' has no other  
rhymes nearby)



## Appendix B      Structure of Chapter XXXIII/iii of *Omeros*

### General Structure

The seventeen couplets contain thirty four lines that may be grouped into eight quartets followed by an envoi of a single couplet. The quartets themselves may be paired into four octets by similarities in 'virtual offbeats' at the end of lines.<sup>1</sup>

The suggestion that Walcott had an octet structure in mind is reinforced by the similarity of the rhyme words that open and close each octet:

'fear', 'air', 'door' and 'roar',  
'sin', 'in', 'Vision' and 'derision',  
'curse', 'verse', 'bear' and 'everywhere'  
'kind', 'mind', 'and', 'hand'.

The seventeenth couplet completes the pattern of virtual offbeats for Octet 4 but is possibly also Walcott having fun with numerology. Its lines are the thirty third and

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<sup>1</sup> A line that ends on a stressed syllable where the succeeding line also begins on a stressed syllable is considered to have a missing or virtual offbeat between the two: e.g. in the first quartet there is a virtual offbeat or missing unstressed syllable between 'fear' and 'house', then between 'air' and 'House' then at the end of the quartet between 'Poe' and 'House' at the beginning of the second quartet.

A similar approach to analysing the structure of XXXIII/iii was first put forward by Callahan (*In the Shadow of Divine Perfection*, pp. 33-37.), though his identification of a regular pattern fails after the first eight lines. He pays more attention to the 7 or 8 syllable count per line and this leads him away from the particular reading given here. He says, 'It is impossible to decide with certainty which scansion is most appropriate to these lines, and thus impossible to decide if Walcott is deviating from the pattern established in the first eight lines or remaining faithful to it.' The scansion is certainly unclear and it is a pity that there is no recording of this section so that Walcott's reading of it can be studied.

thirty fourth in the section and fall at the junction between the thirty third and thirty fourth chapters.

In this reading:

- Quartets One and Two are grouped together into an octet because they are similar in having lines 1, 2 and 4 missing an offbeat.
- Quartets Three and Four are grouped into an octet because they both have lines 2 and 4 missing the offbeat.
- Quartets Five and Six and Quartets Seven and Eight are like a positive and negative image of each other. In the first octet only line 2 is missing an offbeat, in the second octet only lines 4, 6 and 8 are missing an offbeat.

Eliding 'heav'n' and 'deris'n' in the second quartet of Octet 2 in order to give this reading is slightly clumsy, but the analysis is otherwise quite strong.

#### Octet 1

House of umbrage, house of fear, Virtual offbeat

house of multiplying air Virtual offbeat

House of memories that grow

like shadows out of Allan Poe Virtual offbeat

House where marriages go bust, Virtual offbeat

house of telephone and lust Virtual offbeat

House of caves, behind whose door

a wave is crouching with its roar Virtual offbeat

**Octet 2**

House of toothbrush, house of sin,  
of branches scratching, “Let me in!”      Virtual offbeat

House whose rooms echo with rain,  
of wrinkled clouds with Onan’s stain      Virtual offbeat

House that creaks, age fifty-seven,  
wooden earth and plaster heaven      Virtual offbeat by eliding ‘heav’n’

House of channelled CableVision  
whose dragonned carpets sneer derision      Virtual offbeat by eliding ‘deris’n’

**Octet 3**

Unlucky house that I un-curse  
by rites of genuflecting verse      Virtual offbeat

House I unhouse, house that can harden  
as cold as stones in the lost garden

House where I look down the scorched street  
but feel its ice ascend my feet

I do not live in you, I bear  
my house inside me, everywhere

**Octet 4**

until your winters grow more kind  
by the dancing fire-light of mind

where knobs of brass do not exist,

whose doors dissolve with tenderness      Virtual offbeat

House that lets in, at last, those fears

that are its guests, to sit on chairs      Virtual offbeat

feasts on their human faces, and

takes pity simply by the hand      Virtual offbeat

### **Envoi**

shows her her room, and feels the hum

of wood and brick becoming home.

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**A Critical Edition**  
**of**  
**Derek Walcott's *Omeros***

**Part 2 – Annotations**

**by**  
**Donald Edwin Barnard**

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements**  
**for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**  
**in English and Comparative Literary Studies**

**University of Warwick**  
**Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies**

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## Table of Contents

### Part 2 – Annotations to *Omeros*

Introduction	1
Book 1	2
Book 2	90
Book 3	131
Book 4	159
Book 5	180
Book 6	208
Book 7	242

## Annotations to Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

### Introduction

These Annotations provide a brief summary of each Book and Chapter in Derek Walcott's *Omeros* and then explain references which may be obscure. References likely to be resolved by straightforward access to an English dictionary or to a single site on the Internet are generally not explained here.

In addition, the Annotations identify intertextual references in the text and, finally, draw attention to examples of Walcott's prosody, humour and style. A broader discussion of the text is contained in Part 1 of this thesis, the Critical Introduction.



***Book 1.***

The four main story lines are introduced: Philoctete and Ma Kilman, the Achille/Helen/Hector love triangle, the expatriate Plunkett with his wife Maud, and the self-exiled Narrator. All of the main characters appear, including the island itself, and all exhibit the wound that is a key trope.

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***Chapter I.***

Philoctete opens the narration and displays his wound for the tourists. The St Lucians are in harmony with nature, honouring then felling the tree-gods and building the canoes that are their livelihood. The canoe symbolises the traditional way of life, its tree the animist beliefs of the almost extinct native Americans (and by extension, the beliefs of Africa). Both trees and canoes serve the St Lucians gladly. Slow-paced Achille prepares for his fishing with ritual care.

(See Critical Introduction: Metaphor for a discussion of the imagery in this chapter.)

***Chapter I, Section i.***

**Stanza 1.** Philoctete is named for the Greek archer Philoctetes, who also sustained a wound (a snakebite) that crippled him for years and caused his exile on an island. He is one of several characters in the poem named from the Trojan War (Achille, Hector,

Helen) and Walcott uses his own obsession with Troy as a metaphor for his failure to see St Lucia as it is today, rather than as some preserved picturesque past or, worse, as a reflection of classical European archetypes. One thread of the story is how Walcott, as writer, manages to acknowledge and overcome this failure of vision and leads us to do the same.

In Sophocles' eponymous play, Philoctetes was a great archer. He had been intending to participate in the Greek attack on Troy to recover Helen for her husband Menelaus but suffered a snake-bite that gave him great pain and exuded a terrible stench. He had therefore been abandoned on the island of Lemnos while the Greeks went on to Troy. Sophocles recounts how he was eventually sent for because he was the keeper of Hercules' bow, without which the war could not be won. He goes to Troy and is cured, killing many Trojans, including Paris.

In 1990, when *Omeros* was published, Seamus Heaney also published his play *The Cure at Troy*, which deals with the Philoctetes story in the context of Northern Ireland's long conflict.

Classical names were often given to slaves by their owners and such names are used by Walcott as a trope for the violent impositions of slavery, the forced loss of home and identity. Philoctete's wound comes from a rusting anchor and is symbolic of his ancestor's abduction from the African homeland and of the iron ties of the slave coffles. It happens to presage the introduction of the Battle of Wounded Knee in Chapters XXXIV and XXXV.

'Canoes' form a frame for the poem and for its writing. It opens here with an account of the building of the canoes and ends with Achille's canoe being drawn up on the beach (LXIV/iii/7). At the same time, Walcott uses the canoe as a metaphor for his 'craft' (LXIV/ii/12-13). Throughout the poem Philoctete embodies Walcott's concern with naming and language so the opening line is a hidden invocation not just to the island's epic but to the three-year epic of the writing. Walcott rises early to write (and see note to stanzas I/i/8-14).<sup>1</sup>

The irony is not just that Philoctete knows his soul cannot be stolen (because he refuses to sell out to tourism. See I/i/7 'It have some things...worth more than a dollar'), but also that it is the tourists who believe their snaps can catch the soul of the island. See also LIX/iii/1-10 for another response to tourists, where Achille is not as secure about his soul. Tourism is a current threat to the culture of the island.

Melas highlights the shifts in exploitation and commodification in the Caribbean from people (slaves) to products (cotton, sugar) and now to the place itself (tourism) and suggests that a reading that does not take account of tourism as a central theme will oversimplify the poem to a colonial/anticolonial treatment.<sup>2</sup> In fact, tourism and its threats to St Lucian culture form a principal element of Walcott's engagement with the problem of post-colonial identity. Walcott wrote earlier in 'New World', 'Adam had an idea./He and the snake would share/the loss of Eden for a profit./So both made

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 495.

<sup>2</sup> Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2007), pp. 133-140.

the New World. And it looked good.’<sup>3</sup> In a sense, reading *Omeros* we become tourists, and Walcott will later address us directly as if we had done so (LXIV/ii/1).

**Stanzas 1-2.** The use of English Creole in ‘Once wind bring the news//to the *laurier-cannelles*, their leaves start shaking’ is more than Walcott using authentic St Lucian speech. King reports him<sup>4</sup> as being ‘interested in the area in-between standard and West Indian English [and giving] as an example of the uses of dialect, ‘and a wind start to interfere with the trees’ with its suggestiveness and topical sensuality. If he had instead written ‘the wind started to interfere with the trees’ the meaning and the effect of the sound would be different.’ Walcott finds his own tone, in which the authentic ‘tribal’ voice balances the Standard English of high culture (see Critical Introduction: Dialects).

**Stanza 2.** Wounding is a key trope of the poem. Every principal character has some wound and the island itself does not escape this. Its trees are about to be wounded, sacrificed, splashing blood and in X/ii/20-24 the volcanic Soufrière is also a wound. Wounds variously represent Philoctete’s suffering at being uprooted from country and name, Plunkett’s colonial exile and guilt, the Narrator’s betrayal of home and roots and his lost love, Achille’s longing for Africa and so on. With the trees, the wound represents the loss of the old gods of Nature and the destruction of the native Americans.

The first line of the stanza completes a quatrain when read with Stanza 1. This pattern of quatrains divided over tercets continues for most of the book and despite

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<sup>3</sup> Derek Walcott, *Sea Grapes* (London, Cape 1976), republished in *Collected Poems 1948-1984* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 300

<sup>4</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 368.

interruptions is six times more prevalent than the *terza rima* form usually attributed to the poem (see Critical Introduction: Prosody).

The three successive stresses of ‘their leaves start shaking’ are a frequent rhythmic effect in Walcott’s reading of the verse. He enunciates each of the three syllables clearly, completely and evenly, where an English reader might prolong ‘leaves’, demoting the following syllable. Similar effects follow throughout, including ‘ridge-pole gone’ (I/i/21), ‘own vined bodies’ (I/ii/14), ‘flat-bed truck’ and ‘rope-bound bodies’(I/ii/16) and ‘flour-sack sails’ (II/i/3). Comments on Walcott’s readings throughout these notes are based on recordings made by him.<sup>5</sup>

**Stanzas 2-3.** ‘eyes, yes’ could be categorised as an Eye or Sight rhyme, a Walcott joke for he uses Eye rhymes elsewhere when words connected with sight appear (see II/ii/17, III/ii/5 and IV/iii/6, and Appendix A for Rhyme Definitions).

**Stanza 3.** The line break at the end of the first line splits ‘us/fishermen’ and allows a secondary reading as if the line break were a comma.

The onomatopoeic use of ‘f’ echoes the sounds of the wind and the sea. It is characteristic of *Omeros* how Walcott reflects the sense of the story in all aspects of form (rhythm and rhyme patterns, individual stresses, line lengths, caesurae), sound

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<sup>5</sup> *Derek Walcott Reads: Collected Poems 1948-84 & Omeros* (Argo, PolyGram Records double cassette, Catalogue No 522 222 4)

Also: *Derek Walcott Reads: includes excerpts from Omeros, the Odyssey and his Collected Poems* (New York: Caedmon Audio single cassette, Harper Collins ISBN 0-69451-460-8)

Also: *Derek Walcott Reading from his Poems* (The Poetry Archive CD, ISBN 978-1-906324-05-6)

(letter sounds, rhyme words) and appearance on the page (line breaks, letter shapes).

Examples given in the notes are only representative of similar touches throughout.<sup>6</sup>

Line 3 is rhythmically complex. A stress on 'have' is needed for emphatic sense (Walcott reads it this way) and makes the line a standard 6-stress one with four classical feet (iamb/amphimacer/ iamb/ choriamb) plus a closing unstressed syllable. The opening two feet together form a dochmiac figure. Allan, in his commentary on Euripedes' *Helen*, says 'the dochmiac [...] is unusual among Greek metres insofar as it seems to convey a particular emotional connotation, namely that of urgency and excitement. [...] its application ranges from ecstatic joy [...] to passionate grief [...].'<sup>7</sup> It is therefore appropriate that Walcott uses it here.

**Stanza 4.** The cliché 'breath pluming' is reshaped to give it more of a vernacular sound.

**Stanza 5.** The choriamb 'Then we advance' is one of many such. This motif unifies the rhythm as the quatrain rhyming unifies the verse (see Critical Introduction:

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<sup>6</sup> Form is mentioned in the notes to I/i/2, I/i/3, I/i/5, I/i/13, I/i/16-17, I/i/19, I/i/22, I/i/18, II/ii/14, III/i/4-6, III/i/12, IV/ii/1-5, IV/ii/6-7, IV/iii/10, V/i/5-6, V/i/13-17, V/ii/1 and 1-4, V/ii/16, V/iii/9, V/iii/30-33, VIII/i/15-16, IX/i/5 and 9, IX/i/25, IX/ii/1-9, IX/iii/2,8 and 19, X/i/10, X/i/15-16, X/ii/5,9,19 and 27, X/ii/11-15, XIII/iii/8, XV/iii/2-3, XVI/iii/6, XXI/iii/12, XXIV/i/3 and 7, XXIV/i/11, XXIV/ii/4, XXV/i/1-13, XXVI/ii/12, XXVI/iii/15, XXVII/ii/10-11, XXXI/iii/3-4, XXXIII/i/1-11, LII/ii/16, LV/i/8 and 15 and LVI/iii/12-13.

Sound is mentioned in the notes to I/i/3, I/i/19, II/ii/14, V/ii/1, V/iii/7, V/iii/8, V/iii/30-33, VII/i/16, VIII/ii/9, IX/iii/14, XIV/ii/12, XXIV/ii/13-21, XLIX/i/6

Appearance on the page is mentioned in the notes to I/i/22, I/iii/1-4, II/ii/14, II/ii/1, V/iii/6, VIII/i/15-16, VIII/ii/16, XIII/ii/2-3, XIX/ii/6-7, XXV/ii/6, LI/ii/4-5, LVI/iii/12-13, LXIV/i/4-5

<sup>7</sup> Euripedes, *Helen* edited by William Allan (Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics, accessed via Googlebooks 31 Oct 2010) pp 216-7.

Prosody for a discussion of metre and the extent to which this might be classical in form).

**Stanza 7.** ‘corolla’ is stressed by Walcott as a dactyl, not an amphibrach (as Callahan reads it). Walcott’s pronunciation makes the rhyme with ‘dollar’ in the third line of the stanza a fuller one.

**Stanzas 8-14.** A lyrical description of the island at sunrise. Sunrise is a significant time for Walcott. He has said (of the time about five in the morning), ‘But that hour, that whole time of day, is wonderful in the Caribbean. I love the cool darkness and the joy and splendour of the sunrise coming up. I guess I would say...the early dark and the sunrise...and with whatever you are working on, is a very ritualistic thing. I’d go even further and say it’s a religious thing.’<sup>8</sup> (See II/i/3 for a continuation of this thought, also Critical Introduction: Symbolism). Dawn, with its unlimited possibilities, fits Walcott’s view of St Lucia’s situation and the first five chapters of the book are about ‘the rites of morning’ (VI/i/i). In his Nobel Prize acceptance address, *The Antilles*, he said, ‘There is a force of exultation, a celebration of luck, when a writer finds himself a witness to the early morning of a culture that is defining itself, branch by branch, leaf by leaf, in that self-defining dawn, which is why, especially at the edge of the sea, it is good to make a ritual of sunrise. Then the noun, the “Antilles” ripples like brightening water, and the sounds of leaves, palm fronds and birds are the sounds of fresh dialect, the native tongue.’<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Derek Walcott, in conversation with Edward Hirsch, ‘The Art of Poetry XXXVII’, *The Paris Review* 1985, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott* ed. by William Baer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Antilles*, reprinted in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber 1998), p. 79.

The metaphorical significance of the passage lies in the cause of Philoctete's psychological wound, his loss of his ancestral language and name. This is paralleled by the Narrator's story line, where he is seeking a language beyond the imposed one of Eurocentric metaphor, a 'light beyond metaphor', with which to describe the island (see Critical Introduction: Narrative, and : Metaphor). In this passage, the 'cure' is described in the language of the island (water, bird calls, insect buzzing, the sea's sound) and also the silences (the mountains, the idle pools, the eels). The dochmiac figure recurs in 'the clear minnows shoot', 'with one rusted cry', 'with one lifting foot', 'the clear bottom sand' and underlines the significance of the passage.

References to the garrulous waterfall, talkative brooks and idle pools are more than metaphor. They also recall the West African/Caribbean spirits of nature, particularly Mami Wata or Maman Dlo, the female spirit who hides in a waterfall and protects the rivers and forests against the abuse of men. She is seen as both the cause and only cure of sickness.<sup>10</sup>

**Stanza 9.** The colour 'blue' appears often in the poem, always in a distinctive sense. Walcott has admired, in Hemingway's writing, 'certain effects Hemingway achieved by watching [sic] Cézanne. One was to let the stroke of the word 'blue' appear very late in the first few paragraphs. So that the first startling stroke of the word 'blue' comes much later, after the dust and the leaves and so on [...] the point is that the stroke is put down with exactly the same cubic area that a Cézanne stroke is put on a bleached background. Or, say, the rocks or trees are skeletally or sparingly indicated, and then that stroke appeared next to another hue, a blue or a lilac, and so on.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2003)



Hemingway's technique comes from a scrutiny particularly, I think, of watercolo[u]r [sic].'<sup>11</sup>

**Stanza 10.** The sound of the dragonfly's wings resembles a saw. Walcott turns this into a metaphor that contains its own truth.

**Stanza 11.** 'eels sign their names' by leaving 'S' marks in the sand.

**Stanza 13.** Callahan points out that the first line may be read as three choriamb, resolving apparent irregularity into regular trimeter.<sup>12</sup> He prefers this reading to one based on trochees and iambs because of the frequency of the choriamb elsewhere in the section (see Critical Introduction: Prosody for argument against this view).

**Stanza 16.** Walcott stresses 'pillars' when he reads. The Biblical allusion to the bringing down of the temple of the Philistines (Judges 16:29-30) combines with the idea of monotheism replacing the animist gods of the native Americans (and, by implication, those of the Africans). All the metaphors to this point have been based on nature and are local to the island. It is significant that Walcott switches here to an image that is imported from the culture of the slaver and coloniser. The only three 'European' metaphors in this chapter occur where harm is done (see Critical Introduction: Metaphor for a discussion of this).

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<sup>11</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by David Montenegro 1987, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 138.

<sup>12</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 15.

**Stanzas 16-17.** The rhyme on ‘before/jaw/saw’ is the first example of *terza rima* in the poem. Everything to this point has been in quatrains spread over tercets, or an occasional delayed rhyme.

**Stanza 19.** ‘the shark’s teeth gnawed evenly’ contains four successive stresses, reflecting bite after bite and matching in physical form the word ‘evenly’.

**Stanza 20.** The splinters resemble wasps. The horns of the island are the twin volcanic peaks of the Pitons, touched by the rising sun and normally described as resembling Helen’s breasts. The horned island is a frequent epithet in the poem.

**Stanza 21.** There are obvious Greek echoes in the (sacred) grove and sacrifice, but the tradition of such groves extends widely in Europe and India, and in Africa. Achille will visit one in his dream of Africa (XXVI/i/9).

**Stanza 22.** The letters ‘l’, then ‘u’, ‘w’ and ‘v’ represent the falling masts and the troughs of the waves. Walcott uses similar devices elsewhere (e.g. II/i/9 and 11, III/ii/1 and LVIII/ii/7).

The final two lines scan as almost exact mirror images of each other: //xx/x/x/xx/ then /x/xx/x/xx//, reflecting the disturbance and the return to normal. Callahan again sees the possibility of classical trimeter, beginning and ending with ionics.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Chapter I, Section ii.***

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<sup>13</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 15.

**Stanzas 1-2.** The sea swift is a trope used by Walcott to represent, by its swooping criss-cross flight, the stitching together of Africa and the Caribbean. He adapts its migrations to the idea that it carried to the island the seed of the African cure to Philoctete's wound and it will lead Achille's canoe back to Africa in his dream voyage.

**Stanza 4.** In 'veins' Walcott puns on its anagram 'vines', mentioned in I/i/18 as netting the tree. Beyond the immediate physical similarity, this leads into the qualities of blood and wine, their relation to sacrifice particularly, and to vigour and harvest.

His liking for puns showed early (in 'A City's Death by Fire', 1948) and there are some 200 in *Omeros*, more than 90 of those in Book 1. Play with language is a feature of Caribbean popular culture, from calypso and picon to the tea meetings in which the formal speakers are challenged by the audience's heckling. Walcott refers to 'part of the strength of the West Indian psyche [being] a delight in both the precision and power of language'.<sup>14</sup>

'You can be a canoe! Or else you cannot!' Walcott puns macaronically on canoe and its French equivalent, *canot*. *Omeros* is written in three dialects. A Caribbean form of Standard English carries the burden of the narrative, English and French Creoles are used by the St Lucians in dialogue passages. Walcott grew up using them all. He said his initial attempt at the poem was in French Creole, but he found it felt forced to be using the vernacular for a literary purpose. He felt he was doing so 'out of some

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<sup>14</sup> Derek Walcott, *Meanings* p. 51 quoted in Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, p. 46.

kind of national duty and I missed the excitement that I would have had writing in English.' He wished above all to be true to his interior rhythm, his tone (see Critical Introduction: Dialects for a fuller discussion of the issues).<sup>15</sup>

**Stanzas 5-8.** The passage ends with the destruction of the Aruac patois, but the opening stanzas hint of Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*, and his theories on the nature of poetry and the tree-based associations of the Ogham script (see note to XXXIX/i/11).<sup>16</sup>

**Stanza 5.** 'The bearded elders' refers to the trees. When Froude's much-criticised *The English in the West Indies* was published in 1888, a rebutting pamphlet in the same year corrected his speculation that the origin of the island name of Barbados was a race of bearded Caribs.<sup>17</sup> It stated that the *Ficus Indicus* or banyan had a bearded appearance and led to the name *Los Arboles Barbados*, the Bearded Trees.<sup>18</sup> A fuller treatment of the possible origins of the name is in the Macmillan Caribbean guide *A-Z of Barbados Heritage*, which cites the Bearded Fig Tree (*Ficus Citrifolia*) as the likely source of the name, but offers other references to the bearded inhabitants as alternatives.<sup>19</sup> A complete rebuttal of Froude's wider and generally patronising, superficial, inaccurate and biased judgements on the West Indies was published in the following year by Thomas.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Derek Walcott ed. by Gregson Davis, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 96 2 (Spring 1997), p. 245.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 36-43 and 165-204.

<sup>17</sup> James Anthony Froude, *The English in the West Indies, or The Bow of Ulysses* (London: Longmans, Green, 1888), pp. 33-4.

<sup>18</sup> N. Darnell Davis, *Mr Froude's Negrophobia, or Don Quixote as a Cook's Tourist* (Demerara: The Argosy Press, 1888), pp. 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> S. Carrington, H. Fraser, J. Gilmore and A. Forde, *A-Z of Barbados Heritage* (Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean 2003), pp. 16 and 24.

<sup>20</sup> J. J. Thomas, *Froudacity: West Indian Fables by James Anthony Froude* (First published London: T Fisher Unwin 1889, republished London, Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1969).

**Stanzas 6-7.** A short epic catalogue of trees. See note to XVI/ii/5-6. The thorny 'red-skinned logwood' is identified with the Aruacs by its colour and at the same time is given a Christ-like endurance of suffering from 'the thorns in its flesh'. The Aruacs were the aboriginal inhabitants, conquered later by the Caribs and eventually wiped out on St Lucia and virtually so elsewhere through Spanish forced labour.<sup>21</sup>

**Stanza 13.** An image of felling trees for canoes and trundling them (same verb) downhill to the beach appeared nearly 30 years before, in Walcott's first commercially published collection.<sup>22</sup> Many of the images in *Omeros* are repetitions or adaptations of previously used ones (see Critical Introduction: Intertexts). As with his borrowings from other writers, Walcott sees an enriching effect: resonances and the drawing out of eternal and universal themes.

**Stanza 17.** Walcott puns visually on 'exhaling' and 'lung'. The final two lines echo the end of '*The Schooner Flight*': 'I have only one theme://The bowsprit, the arrow, the longing, the lunging heart –/the flight to a target whose aim we'll never know,/vain search for one island...'<sup>23</sup>

In making canoes, following the hollowing out of the log, raised gunwales are fitted to extend the height above the water. From the side, the resulting bow profile is of a projecting open beak. Walcott illustrated this in three paintings reproduced in

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<sup>21</sup> Jan Rogoziński, *A Brief History of the Caribbean* (New York: Facts On File, 1999), pp. 14 and 31-33.

<sup>22</sup> Derek Walcott, *Allegre*, included in *In A Green Night*, (London: Jonathan Cape 1962)

<sup>23</sup> Derek Walcott, 'The Schooner *Flight*', from *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (London: Jonathan Cape 1980), p. 19.

*Tiepolo's Hound*.<sup>24</sup> There is also a classical echo, in that this profile resembles the ram built into the front of the Greek triremes.

**Stanza 18.** The second line is unusually short, having only 9 syllables where most in the poem have 12 or 11. It has four stresses rather than 6 or 5. Callahan notes that while I/ii/1-16 is 48 decasyllabic lines, I/ii/17-20 has only 3 lines out of 12 of that length, possibly to reflect the transformation being undergone by the trees.<sup>25</sup>

The swift's sign is the criss-cross movement of the hand in blessing, reminiscent of the swift's flight. Walcott combines Christian and African influences on faith elsewhere, in Ma Kilman, the obeah-woman who also attends Mass, and here he balances the priest with the swift which represents the spirit guide to Africa.

**Stanza 19.** '*In God We Trust*' is the motto on US currency. Achille's refusal to make his spelling conform fits with his rejection of the tourist culture and determination to make his living in the old way, from fishing. Burnett finds in '*Troust*' several other resonances, including the assertion of Caribbean difference, challenged faith (echoes of 'joust') and the transcendence of faith over acquired skills like literacy.<sup>26</sup>

Walcott said of the name, 'There's an actual canoe like that that I saw spelled like that –T-R-O-U-S-T – and I thought, this is very touching, because the ordinary thing...you would just have passed by, but the error was interesting; I mean the spelling was

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<sup>24</sup> Derek Walcott, *Tiepolo's Hound* (London: Faber and Faber 2000), pp. 24, 44 and 76.

<sup>25</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 106.

interesting and personal, and perhaps more devout than the regular spelling.’<sup>27</sup> His 1949 collection *25 Poems* contains in ‘Letter to a Painter in England’ a reference to ‘The canoes that are marked with comic names: Daylight, St Mary Magdalene, Gay Girl.’<sup>28</sup>

**Stanza 20.** The rhyming here of ‘troughs’ and ‘prows’ shows Walcott’s ingenuity over rhyme. ‘troughs’ is pronounced ‘troffs’ (though in Walcott’s accent rather more open than in Standard English) and can only be seen as rhyming if you recognise that the similarly-spelled ‘*boughs*’ would have rhymed (see Appendix A for definitions of Walcott’s two-dozen rhyme types).

The names Hector and Achilles are given in the English form, signalling the classical confrontation that is to come. The ending of the section with a rhyming couplet is a device used frequently in the poem and may serve an emphatic purpose, drawing attention to a line as here, when the key Achille/Hector confrontation is first hinted at.

### *Chapter I, Section iii.*

**Stanza 1.** Any suggestion that Achille the fisherman and Achilles the mythical hero are one and the same is undercut by the very human-ness of Achille’s peeing. This disavowal is typical of Walcott’s self-aware stance on the metaphor of Troy.

**Stanzas 1-4.** There is strong assonance throughout on ‘ee’ and similar sounds. The clue may lie in the early morning and the resemblance to half-open eyes, a concrete

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<sup>27</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Rebekah Presson 1992, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 190.

<sup>28</sup> Derek Walcott, *25 Poems* (Bridgetown, Barbados: Advocate Company, 1949), p. 6.

image Walcott had used explicitly in 'To Return to the Trees', "'senex", with its two eyes'.<sup>29</sup>

**Stanza 2.** 'the dawn breeze salted him coming up the grey street/past sleep-tight houses' has faint echoes of *Under Milk Wood*, 'Only you can hear the houses sleeping in the streets in the slow deep salt and silent black, bandaged night.'<sup>30</sup> Thomas was a favourite with Harold Simmons, Walcott's early mentor. Walcott's *25 Poems* (1948/9) was reviewed by the BBC's *Caribbean Voices* as 'an important collection...strongly influenced by Dylan Thomas and the new schools of writing...'.<sup>31</sup>

The depot, referred to in LV/i/18 as the fishermen's depot, is where the catch is sold.

**Stanza 4.** The volcanic soil of St Lucia consists 'in the more elevated positions of red earth.'<sup>32</sup>

**Stanzas 6-8.** The religious character of Achille's calling is emphasised. He cleanses himself (dips his hands in holy water), a libation is taken and the fishermen open themselves to the spirit of the sea. Walcott compares his own calling with that of a fisherman at XLVIII/i/14-15, in terms of daily dedication, early rising to the call of a greater power capable of healing all wounds.

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<sup>29</sup> Derek Walcott, *Sea Grapes* and *Collected Poems*, p. 341.

<sup>30</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood* (London and New York, Penguin, 2000), p. 2

<sup>31</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, pp. 26 and 62.

<sup>32</sup> Henry H Breen, *St Lucia: Historical, Statistical and Descriptive* (1844 and London: Frank Cass, 1970), p. 150.



**Stanza 7.** Onomatopoeic alliteration on ‘b’, lip-smacking. Absinthe is a highly alcoholic spirit flavoured with wormwood (‘the bitter bark’) and fennel and anise. Normally drunk diluted with water, here it sounds as though the fishermen are taking it neat, at what could be 45%-74% ABV.<sup>33</sup>

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## *Chapter II.*

At some earlier time, Philoctete’s wound is unhealed and the fishermen launch their boats and set sail, leaving him to numb his pain with rum. Seven Seas, the blind Homer-equivalent, is introduced. Walcott/the Narrator invokes Homer and with his Greek lover gives physical form to his love for the island. There is the first hint that the past, the suffering of slavery, is still present, even when making love.

### *Chapter II, Section i.*

**Stanza 1.** The names are widely derived: Hector the Trojan prince from the Iliad, Theophile (Theophilos) from St Luke’s Gospel and the Acts, Placide after the saint, a disciple of St Benedict, Pancreas maybe after the saint (Pancras), Chrysostom after the saint and archbishop of Constantinople, Maljo the Evil Eye (*mal yeux*, but also possibly influenced by the Latin American *mal ojo*) in the West Indies,<sup>34</sup> Philoctete from the Greek archer.

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<sup>33</sup> Jad Adams, *Hideous Absinthe: A History of the Devil in a Bottle* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), pp. 3-5.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

The implication of 'Christian' is that all are friends but also that none of the fishermen has an African name. Only 'Maljo' will not descend from slave owners giving their property classical names. It was an early rationalisation for the trade that slaves were 'saved' from their heathen beliefs and the hands of the Devil by their masters 'christening' them.

A macaronic pun on 'Philoctete' and 'head'.

**Stanza 2.** 'lances' is one of several similar images used as part of Walcott's Trojan metaphors in the poem. Others are arrows, spears and shields.

**Stanza 4.** 'foam-haired' is an instance of the epithet typical of classical epic. It recurs as 'foam-headed fisherman' in LVI/i/17. Walcott has repeatedly denied that *Omeros* is intended to be an epic<sup>35 36</sup>, though commentators (including King, Ramazani, Fumagalli, Burnett, Hamner) have concluded that he has in effect recast the epic form. Among the conventions that he creolises are launching the story *in medias res* (I/i/1), the gods (I/i/16 and IX/iii/9), invocation of the muse (II/ii/14), the vision (IV/iii/7-10), the descent to the underworld (VIII/ii/1-13 and LVIII/ii/12-LVIII/iii/12), the recusatio (LVI/iii/4), the epic question (LIX/ii/1), the epithet and the quest.

**Stanza 6.** 'useless' describes both the almond's shade and Philoctete.

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<sup>35</sup> Derek Walcott: 'I think any work in which the narrator is almost central is not really an epic. It's not like a heroic epic.' Interviewed by Rebekah Presson, *New Letters Vol 59, No 1*.(1992), reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 189.

<sup>36</sup> Derek Walcott: 'Then there was the idea of my undertaking something they call an epic, which I don't call an epic; I call it a very intimate work.' *Reflections on Omeros*, in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 1997, p. 240.

**Stanza 7.** ‘leoparding’ implies the spotted effect of the sun through the leaves, but also has an echo of ‘*leper*’. Walcott makes verbs of nouns, as here, and ‘needling’ mosquitos (at I/ii/10), a tray ‘sailed’ (i.e. raised like a sail, at IV/iii/2) and elsewhere. This stylistic touch, with his liking for unusual compounds (stone-webbed at V/iii/15, pincer-extended at VI/1/2 and foam-sprinters at VI/i/4), reminds of Milton and Dylan Thomas and was evident much earlier in his writings. Baugh and Nepaulsingh draw attention<sup>37</sup> to its occurrence in *Another Life* (1973), but compounding was in evidence in ‘As John to Patmos’ and, with the verbing of nouns, in ‘A City’s Death by Fire’<sup>38</sup>, at least thirty years before *Omeros*.

**Stanza 8.** ‘White rum’ is a desperate cure for West Indian post-colonial aimlessness (see XLVIII/iii/1-2: ‘Feel the shame, the self-hate//draining from all our bodies in the exhausted sleeping/of a rumshop closed Sunday.’) There are ironic reminders, in the adjective and in the noun, of the exploiters and the role of rum trading as one leg in the Triangular Trade with England or New England.

**Stanza 9.** The repeated ‘h’ mimics the hooked shape of the hands and reminds of Philoctete’s wound.

**Stanza 11.** The repeated ‘l’ mimics the shape of the logs.

**Stanza 12..** ‘manchineels’ (*Hippomane mancinella*) are a tropical coast-loving tree which is highly poisonous. Contact with any part of the tree or its sap can raise

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<sup>37</sup> Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh, *Derek Walcott, Another Life, fully annotated*, p. 192.

<sup>38</sup> Derek Walcott, *In a Green Night*, reprinted in *Collected Poems* p. 6.

blisters. Even rain falling through it can blister and eating even a small part of the attractive fruit can kill. The poison was used by the Caribs on their arrows.<sup>39</sup> There is a West Indian proverb: 'Mahogany can't grow under manchineel' meaning roughly you can't get the best if the conditions aren't right.<sup>40</sup>

**Stanza 14.** Walcott puns on 'drew their bows'.

'pinned them by the nose' because of the names painted on the bows. Naming something gives a kind of ownership, a theme for Walcott, where Adamic figures have the opportunity to name things for the first time and thereby discover their place in the world. He has written of 'this elemental privilege of naming the New World',<sup>41</sup>

**Stanza 15.** 'St Lucia' and 'Light of My Eyes'. One boat is named for the island or its eponymous saint, St Lucia, whose name derives from the Latin for light, *lux*, *lucis*. She was blinded for her faith and the juxtaposition of these two boats' names is therefore poignant.

**Stanza 16.** The final clause contains many letters 'c', seven in the last line and a half. This might be a joking pun on the opening words of the next section: 'Seven Seas'.

***Chapter II, Section ii.***

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<sup>39</sup> <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A2346400>> [accessed 19 Dec 2010]

<sup>40</sup> Lito Valls, *Ole Time Sayin's: Proverbs of the West Indies* (St John, U.S.V.I., private publication, 1983), saying number 451.

<sup>41</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Muse of History* (1974) in *What the Twilight Says*, p. 40.

**Stanzas 1-2.** Seven Seas is a protean figure who at times represents Homer. III/ii/6-7 gives the origin of his name as a cod-liver oil label, a distant link to the healing trope of the poem.

**Stanza 4.** The dog is symbolic of Walcott himself, (see LVI/i/3 and 12 'khaki dog', and Critical Introduction: Symbolism) and is seen throughout the poem seeking for home, printing the virgin sand with its paws or here, whining and asking 'to be let in'. This symbol appears elsewhere, in 'The Almond Trees' as the old fisherman's mongrel chasing the stick of 'No visible history'<sup>42</sup> and as the black mongrel 'its eyes with no fleck of hope,/resigned to its limits, the doors it could not enter.' in *Tiepolo's Hound*.<sup>43</sup>

**Stanza 12.** The 'two blackbirds quarrelled' could be a light forewarning of the coming quarrel between Hector and Achilles. They were not, of course, English blackbirds. A range of species attracts the name in the Caribbean and these might have been 'merles' or possibly 'boat-tail grackles'.<sup>44</sup>

**Stanzas 13-14.** The drumming of his fingers recalls the drumbeat that kept the rowers to time on a Greek galley, 'another sea' being the Aegean between Greece and Troy. Here, the Narrator addresses Seven Seas as Homer. He remembers his boyhood fascination with the classics that first stirred his imagination.

The metre of the end of the invocation is appropriately classical, an anacreontic 'with the conch's moan, *Omeros*', as it will be again in Stanza 22 'of a girl's throat,

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<sup>42</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Castaway and Other Poems*, (London: Jonathan Cape 1965)

<sup>43</sup> Derek Walcott, *Tiepolo's Hound*, p.27.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

Omeros'. Both lines use the amphibrachic stressing of 'Omeros' spelled out in II/iii/3-4, rather than the dactylic one used in modern Greek and in II/iii/1. 'conch' is pronounced 'conk' (see LVII/i/11-12 for rhyme conch/trunk).

The assonance on 'O' in Line 1 of Stanza 14 is both onomatopoeic of the sound of the conch and a visual pun on its open bell.

**Stanzas 17-19.** *Cyclops Eye* by Joseph Auslander is the first complete volume of modern verse Walcott can remember reading.<sup>45</sup> Here, he weaves together details of his childhood scene – the surf around the cape beneath the lighthouse that is blind by day – and the Cyclops myth – his sheep used by Odysseus' men to escape, the blinded giant throwing boulders after the fleeing ships. There is a further resonance for Walcott, who, in 'The Schooner Flight', wrote of another of his literary alter egos, the sailor-poet Shabine, '...either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation'.<sup>46</sup> The myth has Odysseus claim to be 'no man' and the Cyclops cry that 'no man' has blinded him.

The 'frigate' bird has strongly angled wings resembling scythes or sickles. The alliteration on 's' underlines the shape of the wings and the sound of the scythe. Walcott had used the bird's Latin and patois names in 'A Latin Primer': *Fregata magnificens*, *ciseau-la-mer* (scissor the sea).<sup>47</sup>

'the seeds of grey almonds' are the blind eyes of Omeros (see II/iii/9). The 'ee' of 'seeds' resembles closed eyes.

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<sup>45</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott, A Caribbean Life*, p. 44.

<sup>46</sup> Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948-84*, p. 346.

<sup>47</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Arkansas Testament*, pp. 23-4.

‘the grape leaves rusted’ refers to the sea-grape leaves turning red, but also, because this passage is addressed to Homer, the leaves of Greek grape vines, rust being a common disease in them.

**Stanza 18.** The internal rhymes (shape, grape, cape) echo ‘ape’, to mimic, continuing the thought started in line 1.

**Stanzas 20-21.** ‘opening line’, ‘epic’, ‘feet’ This is the first of several self-referential passages where the Narrator alludes directly to the writing process.

**Stanza 21.** ‘ebony captains’ is a probable reference to Thomas Fuller’s *The Holy State and the Profane State* (1642): “But our captain counts the image of God - nevertheless his image - cut in ebony as if done in ivory, and in the blackest Moors he sees the representation of the King of Heaven.” Charles Lamb refers to this quotation in his *Essays of Elia*, confessing he is ‘a bundle of prejudices’ and saying he admires the Negro countenance but would not wish ‘to associate with them, to share my meals and my good-nights with them - because they are black.’

**Stanza 22.** This is the second mention of *Omeros* in the poem and it falls at II/ii/22. Perhaps a coincidence, for Walcott’s play with numerology mainly relates to the number ‘three’ and is discussed in Critical Introduction: Prosody.

*Chapter II, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 1 and 4.** Antigone laughs because the Narrator has said ‘Homer’ on seeing the bust, and tells him her word for the poet. Stanza 1 has the modern Greek stressed pronunciation, a dactyl with the stress on ‘O’ and the second syllable a short ‘mer’. Callahan scans the word as in the creative mispronunciation in Stanza 4, where Walcott/the Narrator pronounces it as an amphibrach with the second syllable stressed as a long ‘mair’, allowing it to acquire a meaning in patois.<sup>48</sup> (see also XLIII/iii/18)

**Stanza 2.** The winged red horse is the symbol of Mobil Oil (well-known in the West Indies), Pegasus symbolising ‘the power and speed made possible by the use of Mobil products. Pegasus’ association with the Muses likewise emphasises the creative innovation for which Mobil has been known for more than a century.’<sup>49</sup> Walcott may be slyly ambiguous with his ‘listening to the shallows’ noise’ and is certainly being ironic, given that Pegasus was once thought to be the creator of the Hippocrene spring on Mount Helicon and therefore associated with poetic inspiration.

**Stanza 7.** Antigone may well voice Walcott’s feelings after his long spell in New York and Boston.

**Stanza 11.** ‘coffled’ means shackled. Coffles were a way of joining one slave to another by the neck or hand to form a line so they could be marched without risk of them running away.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 19.

<sup>49</sup> Exxon website <[http://www.exxonmobil.co.uk/UK-English/about\\_history\\_mobil\\_pegasus.aspx](http://www.exxonmobil.co.uk/UK-English/about_history_mobil_pegasus.aspx)> [accessed 5 Jan 2010]

<sup>50</sup> John Gilmore, Beryl M. Allen, Dian McCallum and Romila Ramdeen, *Longman Caribbean History: Empires and Conquests* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2003), p. 78.



**Stanzas 13-14.** The ‘prow with painted eyes’ alludes to Jason’s ship, the *Argo*, and the Mediterranean custom of painting eyes on ships’ prows. Argus was a mythical hundred-eyed giant.

The simile and metaphors are of love-making: a ‘port’ to be entered, her nose and eyes lifting from her hair, her throat the ‘vase’ already referred to in II/ii/22. Her ‘hollow moan’ may have been a wordless ‘O’, but Walcott/the Narrator hears in it ‘Touch it again’ (see III/i/1).

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### ***Chapter III.***

The rivalry of Hector and Achille over Helen explodes. Ma Kilman, the bar-keeper and obeah-woman, watches Philoctete get drunk and remembers there may be a cure, but not where to find it.

### ***Chapter III, Section i.***

**Stanza 3.** ‘roi’, king. The meaning is localised as ‘*champion*’ (i.e. the strongest or best man in the village), as in one of the many folk competitions (stick fighting, carnival etc) where the winner is named ‘king’. Hector and Achille are old rivals in such events (see V/iii/29-33). ‘roi’ does not, therefore, imply Achille getting above his social rank but challenges his standing in the village (and his claim on Helen), the classic ‘*Come on, if you’re man enough*’.

‘bomme’ (sometimes *bonm* in Creole spelling) is a bucket or pail.<sup>51</sup> Here it is an old tin (see III/i/12), pressed into further use because it doesn’t cost anything. The tin will become a memento of Hector after his death, taken from his grave by Achille with Helen’s permission (XLVI/i/13) and later symbolising Achille’s taking over providing for her (LXIV/iii/11). At XLV/iii/8 and XLVI/i/7 we learn the tin is red. In ‘The Three Musicians’ putting red tins on the porch at Christmas is asking for pardon.<sup>52</sup>

**Stanzas 4-6.** The rhyme structure here reflects the narrative. ‘replaced the tin’ is unrhymed at first sight, but has a delayed internal rhyme with ‘face-off’, which is also otherwise unrhymed. Together, these two lines frame a pair of rhyming couplets ‘prow/enough, blade/shade’. This unusual arrangement reflects the opposition of Hector and Achille, antagonists over Helen. The rhyming of ‘prow’ with ‘enough’ may sound archaic, but is paralleled in I/ii/19-20 and is more likely a Walcottian take on the eye rhyme once-removed, recognising that ‘*bough*’, for example, would have rhymed.

**Stanza 5.** The first line has 15 syllables, instead of the normal 12. There is no clear reason for the excess, other than the anapaestic metre with its extra syllables. ‘of Hector’s boat’ is a partial repetition of ‘from Hector’s canoe’, perhaps Walcott’s subversion of classical anaphora, an emphatic device to stress the ownership issue.

**Stanza 10.** ‘gnashing its tail’ is unusual, where ‘*lashing*’ might be expected. Walcott instead sees in the curl and foam of the surf an angry dog turning on itself in the confusion of the fight, meaning Hector, because he and Achille are so close.

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<sup>51</sup> Jones E. Mondesir, compiler, Lawrence D Carrington, editor *Dictionary of St Lucian Creole*, (Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), p. 33.

<sup>52</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Arkansas Testament*, p. 28.

**Stanza 12.** The form is tetrameter. The final sentence contains four amphibrachs, Callahan sees this establishment of a firm metre, where the preceding lines were irregular, as emphasising key lines. He notes that this is a reversal of traditional metrical practice, which pulls away from an established metre for emphasis.<sup>53</sup>

*Chapter III, Section ii.*

**Stanza 1.** Such combined bar/stores (see IX/i/18) as Ma Kilman's are common in the islands.<sup>54</sup>

The prominent 'g', 'b' and 'd' mimic the curlicues of architectural gingerbread, the fretwork bargeboards to the eaves and the filigreed wrought iron balconies. There is a faint echo of the gingerbread house discovered by Hansel and Gretel, with Ma Kilman as the good witch reversing the fairy tale, but gingerbread eaves and balconies are common enough in the West Indies for this to be accidental.<sup>55</sup>

**Stanza 3.** 'NO PAIN' is a translation (and pun) of νηπενθέξ (nepenthe), 'no sorrow', the drug Helen administers to her guests in *The Odyssey* Book 4.<sup>56</sup> It is also a prophecy of Ma Kilman's role in curing Philoctete. Ma Kilman states this explicitly, ostensibly as a joke on her husband's death or possibly on the numbing effect of alcohol, but also as a joke by Walcott against the reader, who will not realise at this stage that it applies literally.

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<sup>53</sup> Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection*, p. 22.

<sup>54</sup> Jan Rogoziński, *A Brief History of the Caribbean*, p. 358.

<sup>55</sup> Gerald G. Waterson, *This Old House: a Collection of Drawings of Trinidadian Homes* (Newtown, Trinidad: Pariah Publishing, 1983), pp. 4 and 47.

<sup>56</sup> Martin Hammond, translator of Homer, *The Odyssey* (London: Duckworth, 2000), p. 34.

**Stanzas 5-6.** The use of an eye rhyme on 'blind/wind' is wordplay on Walcott's part (see note to I/i/2-3).

**Stanza 6.** 'St. Omere' is a common surname in St Lucia. Walcott's close friend is Dunstan St. Omer, the artist and designer of St Lucia's flag, his cousin Garth St Omer a writer and also a friend. However, the resonance of the name with Homer is inescapable.

**Stanza 7.** 'They were Greek to her' is an in-joke with the reader. 'Or old African babble.' Ma Kilman at this stage has no knowledge of Africa. Her memory of the African cure for Philoctete's wound is yet to be awakened.

**Stanza 8.** A pun on 'shades' as the sunglasses the blind man wears and the idea that he may recall the ghosts of dead warriors at Troy.

**Stanza 11.** 'White acajou' is the name of a West African tree, the white mahogany.<sup>57</sup> Here, the sense is clearly rum that has not been allowed to age and is therefore white (see II/i/8). It may be that Ma Kilman served rum from Clement's Domaine de l'Acajou on Martinique, or that white acajou is used as a generic name. Given the source of Philoctete's pain in his longing for his lost African name and identity, the choice of a word with these two meanings could be intentional on Walcott's part.

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<sup>57</sup> <[http://www.tis-gdv.de/tis\\_e/misc/holzart.htm](http://www.tis-gdv.de/tis_e/misc/holzart.htm)> [accessed 1 Nov 2010]

Walcott may also have in mind the poem published in 1764 by James Grainger, a Scots physician, poet and planter. *The Sugar Cane* reads, in a passage advising planters on clearing land:

Yet spare the guava, yet the guaiac spare;  
A wholesome food the ripened guava yields,  
Boast of the housewife; while the guaiac grows  
A sovereign antidote, in wood, bark, gum,  
To cause the lame his useless crutch forego,  
And dry the sources of corrupted love.  
Nor let thy bright impatient flames destroy  
The golden shaddoc, the forbidden fruit,  
The white acajou, and rich sabbaca: <sup>58</sup>

While it is the guaiac (the *lignum vitae* tree) that is the sovereign antidote to lameness in the poem (not to mention the sources of corrupted love !) there may be an association in Walcott's mind.

### ***Chapter III, Section iii.***

**Stanza 1.** 'blest' is a macaronic pun on 'blessé' (literally 'wounded') but also recalls the original meaning of 'blessing', the marking of something with blood to make it holy or protect it.

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<sup>58</sup> James Grainger, *The Sugar Cane: A Poem in Four Books. With Notes* (London: R. and J. Dodsley 1764 (facsimile edition available on Googlebooks 2009)), Book 1, lines 37-45.

**Stanza 2.** Walcott's St Lucian pronunciation of 'easy', with its prolonged and evenly stressed final syllable, is a much 'easier' word than the Standard English which bites off the final syllable. The West Indian pronunciation rhymes twice over with 'sea' in line 3.

**Stanza 6.** 'sewing' is a key trope. Walcott's mother Alix, after working all day as a teacher, took in sewing at night to make ends meet and support her sons' artistic talents. Ma Kilman sews and is a healer, Maud Plunkett sews a tapestry quilt (LIII/ii/6-7) Penelope-like, and is directly compared to the Narrator's mother as she dies, martins at dusk 'sew the silk sky' (XI/iii/3), bats fly with 'crisscrossing stitches' (XLVIII/i/28) and the ever-returning sea-swift sews with her curved and dipping flight both sides of Walcott's text, *New and Old Worlds*, 'she sewed the Atlantic rift with a needle's line, the rift in the soul' (LXIII/iii/1-4) and is the healer. Alix's sewing is interestingly paralleled by Aimé Césaire's memory of 'the Singer, bitterly biting into the soft flesh of the night as my mother pedals, pedals for our hunger every day, every night.'<sup>59</sup> More recently the same theme has been developed by Lorna Goodison in 'For My Mother (May I Inherit Half Her Strength)': 'When I came to know my mother many years later, I knew her as the figure who sat at the first thing I learned to read: "SINGER," and she breast-fed my brother while she sewed; and she taught us to read while she sewed, and/ she sat in judgement over our disputes while she sewed.'<sup>60</sup>

**Stanza 9.** 'It have' meaning '*There is*' is an English Creole phrase that may show a direct link back to the French '*Il y a*' (literally '*it has there*'), or to a native language

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<sup>59</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, p. 83.

<sup>60</sup> Lorna Goodison, *Tamarind Season: Poems* (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica, 1980), p. 61.

in West Africa. Taylor finds grammatical traits in many Caribbean creoles that are typically West African, but does not mention this one.<sup>61</sup>

**Stanza 11.** Philoctete sees his name as meaningless, an illness he has contracted. See II/i/1 and XXV/iii/7-8. Walcott signals here at III/iii/8 and IV/1/5 that the name, imposed originally on an earlier generation by some colonial master, is indeed a non-sense. Schoolboys mock and corrupt it, sheep bleat it. 'Walcott turns it into a trope for violent colonial imposition, a partial cause of the wound to which it is metonymically linked.'<sup>62</sup>

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#### *Chapter IV.*

Philoctete has a crisis of pain in his yam garden over his lack of roots, his lost history because of the dislocation of slavery, then resigns himself to bear it. The Narrator watches the tourists with scorn, then sees Helen for the first time.

#### *Chapter IV, Section i.*

**Stanza 3.** The lack of a black Caribbean history, and amnesia of the African one, are a theme of the poem and symptomatic of a malaise that is dealt with often by West Indian writers. The lack of ruins means that there is no visible evidence of a great past to sustain and encourage.

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<sup>61</sup> Douglas Taylor, *Languages of the West Indies* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 190-195.

<sup>62</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse, Postcolonial Poetry in English*, p. 55.

**Stanza 5.** ‘the Atlantic wind’ is the easterly trade wind. A constant feature of the windward side of the Caribbean islands, distorting tree growth, it was the wind that made the slave trade possible and is a reminder of that trade. See XLV/iii/3.

**Stanza 6.** ‘yam’ (*Dioscorea*) is a tropical tuberous vine whose leaves have the same general shape as Africa. It has many varieties and its tuber is a staple food in the tropics world-wide. The name has added poignancy in respect of Philoctete, though he may not realise it, because its root meanings of ‘food’ or ‘eat’ are found in several African languages.<sup>63</sup> Unlike him, it has not entirely lost its original name.

‘Yam’ is also believed to be a term for ‘foot’ in the West Indies (no reference found).

‘leaves like maps of Africa’ Baugh draws attention to the way Africa is referred to in details of the poem, always with admirable connotations: ‘African villages’ (X/ii/2), ‘the long African combers’ (XLV/i/16), Ma Kilman’s ‘old African/doubt’ (X/ii/9) and above all Helen’s beauty, compared to a ritual ebony mask (IV/iii/10). Walcott had been accused of not being black enough, because of his opposition to the back-to-Africa tendency and his preference for established (i.e. ‘European’) poetic form. In *Omeros*, he gives black St Lucians and their African heritage pride of place, without giving up his own pride in the island as the place of the future for him and the islanders.

**Stanzas 10-11.** The priest’s robes spark the image of a ‘floating feather’. The priests in Walcott’s birthplace Castries and in Gros Îslet were of the French order, Fils de

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<sup>63</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*



Marie Immaculée (FMI), whose habits are white (see XLVIII/iii/4 ‘priests...in their white satin frocks’). Fr. Jesse FMI (see below) helped in support of the parish priest of Gros Îslet from 1967-8 and in 1971.<sup>64</sup>

Walcott had a public and long-running battle with Fr. Jesse FMI, who saw a dangerous influence and heresy in his first published poem, ‘1944’, which argued for learning of God through nature rather than received tradition (see Critical Introduction: Autobiography). This caused the Methodist Walcott to be shunned at the St Mary’s College he attended, run by the FMI. In 1946 the FMI were replaced in running the school by the Irish Presentation Brothers, from Cork, and Walcott found himself more in tune with their humour and contempt for the British.<sup>65</sup> They encouraged him to develop his taste in Irish literature.

Burnett notes that Walcott is ‘[l]ike his beloved James Joyce, deeply anti-clerical.’ and she repeats his observation to Selden Rodman in the early 1970’s, that ‘My faith in God has never wavered – which doesn’t mean I have any time for the Mafialike churches!’<sup>66</sup> This comes out in this passage and causes us to read the imagery more carefully. The ‘bamboo poles/weighed down by nets’ represent the fishermen, weighed down by their labour, the ‘floating feather of the priest’ shows the lightness of the burden carried by the Church.

**Stanzas 12-13.** The repetition of ‘He hacked...at the heel’ is anaphora, emphasising a key phrase. Elsewhere (in I/ii/2), Achille has had a thorn dig into his heel, in an oblique reference to classical myth. Here the reference is more direct, pointing to

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<sup>64</sup> Charles Gachet FMI, *A History of the Roman Catholic Church in St Lucia*, p. 325.

<sup>65</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott, A Caribbean Life* pp 37-40 and 53.

<sup>66</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 101.

Philoctete's Achilles-heel, his lack of roots causing him too to 'curl... head-down'.

This is followed by a straightforward repetition of a main theme of *Omeros*, the sense of rootlessness in the post-slavery society of the Caribbean.

**Stanza 15.** The sea swift appears again, this time to Philoctete. The spirit of Africa is accompanied by the breeze, the trade wind from the Atlantic, this time bringing comfort.

*Chapter IV, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 1-5.** The rhyme scheme changes from its irregular, almost chaotic form to regular rhyming triplets for the next five stanzas. This reflects Philoctete's change of mood from desperation to acceptance. The preponderance of masculine rhyme words also underlines the peace this brings. The change in him follows directly on the appearance in the previous line of the sea-swift.

**Stanza 1.** Pun on 'swift' and 'swallow'.

**Stanzas 2-3.** Philoctete's 'pebbled spine' is symbolic later (XLIX/i/6) of the Caribbean islands. This makes 'altering white continents' more than a painterly view of clouds. Walcott foresees the Caribbean not just taking control of its destiny but initiating change in the established order of nations.

**Stanza 5.** The repeated words and phrases are anaphora and the stressed 'they', 'they', 'they' give the effect of a hymn in praise of the simple herdsman. Asked if he

was attempting to create heroes (in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*) Walcott said, 'No, no! I do not believe in heroes....The people I honour and glory from simplicity, not from a Marxist or political viewpoint, rather say from a Whitmanesque one, are my heroes. Fishermen. Working men, isolated artists. Not political figures: That develops fascism!' <sup>67</sup>

The passage has similarity of structure and tone to Césaire's 'Eia for those who have never invented anything/for those who have never explored anything/for those who have never subdued anything'. <sup>68</sup>

**Stanza 6.** Philoctete's wound and his patient acceptance are foreshadowed in Walcott's remark in 1985, 'It is not because one wishes to forget (what the slave-owners did); on the contrary, you accept it as much as anybody accepts a wound as being part of his body. But this doesn't mean you nurse it all your life.' <sup>69</sup>

**Stanzas 6-7.** The rhymes on these lines resemble the final six lines of a sonnet, with the turn of thought falling at Philoctete's decision to accept his condition.

#### *Chapter IV, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 1-6.** This whole section is written as a form of broad comedy, almost slapstick. This heightens the drama at Stanza 7, when all humour is dropped. In the year *Omeros* was published Walcott said, 'I don't think comedy is an element of

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<sup>67</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Leif Sjöberg in *Artes No 1* 1983, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 80.

<sup>68</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, p. 115.

<sup>69</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Edward Hirsch, *The Paris Review*, 101 (Winter 1986) given in 1985, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 115.

poetry...because there's something beyond comedy, and that's the sublime....On the other hand, however, in terms of being West Indian, this idea can almost be contradicted. Because of its endurance, the Caribbean spirit can be comic...The kind of comedy that is in the Caribbean is also mixed with tragedy.'<sup>70</sup>

**Stanza 1.** 'white' and 'black' highlight the discrepancy in colour between tourists and those who service their needs.

Walcott's situation here, seated on the terrace, is one that recurs often. The Plunketts gaze out from their watering hole (V/i/1-3), Walcott stands on 'the morning boards of the verandah' (VII/iii/11), Walcott stands on the café balcony (XLIX/iii/1), Walcott walks out onto his hotel balcony (LVI/i/1) and there are several more verandah occasions in the poem. The theme appears in other writings too: *Another Life* opens and ends with it. The significance goes beyond a simple tropical mode of living in the verandah's airy space. There is a definite sense of observing and separateness that perhaps goes with Walcott's poet persona.

The spelling of 'cheque' is unusually English, given that the term 'waiting for the check' is American, while the English would say 'waiting for the bill'. Later, for example in XLVIII/i/6, the spelling of 'feces' is American. The variability may be a result of Walcott's dual literary heritage, or due to American editorship of the first printing.

**Stanza 2.** The metaphor is savagely ironic, that the tourists will later also be having their evening barbecue of scorched meat. The idea of revolving is reinforced by the use of the palindromic 'noon'.

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<sup>70</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J. P. White, *Green Mountains Review Vol 4 No 1* 1990, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 170.

**Stanza 4.** ‘Lawrence of St. Lucia’ refers to the David Lean 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*. This intertextual reference leaves it unclear whether the waiter was actually called Lawrence or has acquired the sobriquet in Walcott’s mind from his struggle with the sand dunes. However, later references seem to confirm the name is genuine (see IV/iii/6 and LIX/iii/10).

‘self-conscious champagne’ The transferred epithet adds to Walcott’s scorn at the tourists.

**Stanza 5.** In ‘then plunked’ Walcott makes a self-referential pun on another character in the poem, Dennis Plunkett.

**Stanzas 7 and 10.** ‘panther’ and ‘ebony’ are images Walcott used when idealising (or idolising) a black woman seen on a transport in St Lucia, in ‘The Light of the World’.<sup>71</sup> Here, with the ‘caging wires’, the reference to the ‘bars’ of Rilke’s poem ‘The Panther’ is strong, though its sense of existential despair may be more tragic than Walcott’s Helen: ‘It seems to him there are/a thousand bars, and behind the bars, no world’.

**Stanza 9.** Walcott transfers the epithet ‘widening’ from the ‘wake’ to the ‘eyes’ and also puns on ‘*wide awake*’.

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<sup>71</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Arkansas Testament*, p. 48.

**Stanza 10.** The image reminds of the ebony ritual masks of the Guro, Ashanti and many other tribes in West Africa (or the bronzes of Benin) and also Dunstan St Omer's altar piece in the church at Roseau, St Lucia, where the Madonna is also modelled on such masks. It contrasts with the white classical bust of Homer (see II/iii/9). In each case, the eyes are an important feature (carved lids, stone almonds).

The last line is only loosely rhymed but there is also a single consonant echo from the caesural 'Helen' to the final 'followed'. While not quite strong enough to form a leonine rhyme, this reinforces the emphatic sense given to the name, both by its position at the caesura and by its syntax as a one-word speech preceding the full stop.

'And all the rest followed' states that Helen's beauty is driver of the action of the poem. It is the trigger for the Hector/Achille rivalry and for Plunkett's obsessive research into island history. She was the Narrator's reason for searching for classical metaphors and ultimately for recognising the error and futility of doing so. By transference, it is not Helen the woman but Helen the island of St Lucia, ('*Helen of the West Indies*' because it was fought over so often) that is the driver of the poem. Above all else, *Omeros* is a poem that celebrates the island of Walcott's birth.

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### ***Chapter V.***

The Plunketts are shown as different from the ex-colonial norm, he despising the expatriates and remembering the failure of exploitative Empire, she realistic about the island's corrupt politicians. They too see Helen, their former housemaid, and Plunkett

has the idea that Helen and the island, known as the Helen of the West, need a history. Achille and Hector, who will be seen later as representing tradition and modernisation, are village champions competing for Helen.

*Chapter V, Section i.*

**Stanza 1.** Major Plunkett had a namesake in Walcott's youth in 1944, where a prize-winner at a Costume Ball for St Lucia Day was Major E. O. Plunkett, a colonial policeman.<sup>72</sup> 'Major' is a title to which Plunkett is not entitled, his army rank being Regimental Sergeant Major (see LXI/i/3). The use of the officer rank is a vanity of which he is slightly ashamed (see V/i/18). The deception is in line with Walcott's dicta in V/ii/7-8 (every 'I' is a fiction finally) and in *The Bounty*, 'I myself am a fiction'.<sup>73</sup> Walcott believes in the self as a fluid concept and followed the logic of this idea through when making fiction out of his own life.

**Stanza 2.** The scene is reminiscent of 'grey, ghostly loungers at verandah ends', from Walcott's 1962 poem 'Verandah'.<sup>74</sup> The concentration of adverbs (gently, adjacently, quietly, wifely) makes this opening deliberately prosaic. This couple are concerned that things are done in a fitting manner.

Walcott names Maud for her love of her garden and with a nod to Tennyson's 'Come into the garden, Maud'.<sup>75</sup> He may also have thought of Yeats' unrequited love for the Irish heiress and nationalist Maud Gonne, particularly as that Maud married a

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<sup>72</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott, A Caribbean Life*, p. 41.

<sup>73</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Bounty*, (London: Faber and Faber 1997), p. 50.

<sup>74</sup> Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948-84*, p. 89.

<sup>75</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Maud* (1855) from *Poetical Works* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, undated), p. 430.

Major (a real one, rather than a jumped-up Sergeant). 'Maud' means '*strength in battle*', a suitable name for Plunkett's wife and for someone who shows great courage in enduring his temper.

'kraal' reminds of Africa, as do the 'peaked thatch', the 'raffia décor' and the 'watering-hole'.

**Stanzas 3-4.** The terms 'watering-hole' and 'yardarm' are typical of a particular class in British society, especially its ex-colonial or ex-patriate members. Dated and only used for comic or ironic effect by anyone not moving in (mainly) middle-class and highly middle-aged circles, the terms here set the Plunketts firmly in their social stratum, despite Plunkett's scorn at the members of the Victoria Club (see V/i/11-15).

**Stanzas 5-6.** The rhymes are wrenched imperfect ('ends', 'silence' and 'edge', 'marriage' and 'here', 'water'). This says something about the marriage, also a less than perfect match.

**Stanza 6.** 'Their marriage/a silver anniversary of bright water' is a reference to Kathleen Raine's *The Marriage of Psyche*, 'He has married me with a ring, a ring of bright water'.<sup>76</sup> Raine's love affair with Gavin Maxwell was mostly on her part and he was unable to reciprocate as she wished.

**Stanzas 6-8.** 'Pigs. Orchids' Walcott relates the Plunketts' farming activities to Homer's *Odyssey*, (Circe turning Odysseus' companions into pigs and the encounter

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<sup>76</sup> Kathleen Raine, *Collected Poems* (London, Boston, Sidney: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 67.



with the Island of the Lotus Eaters). Eating the lotus made men forget their homeland, strengthening the relevance. The contrast between Maud's Glen-da-Lough and Dennis' desert helps explain their differing views of St Lucia, hers a tolerance struggling with homesickness and hatred of the climate, his an idealising of the island. 'Glen-da-Lough' is the monastery of St Kevin in County Wicklow, Ireland. It has associations with Yeats from his poem 'Under the Round Tower', the tower adjacent to St Kevin's church. The church and cathedral were destroyed in 1398 by an English army, Maud's love for Plunkett illustrating Walcott's view that wounds are never forgotten but absorbed and accepted.

Walcott may have visited Glen-da-Lough as a result of his friendship with Seamus Heaney, who lived at Glanmore, Co Wicklow, 10 km from Glen-da-Lough.

**Stanza 7.** 'Monty' is General (later Field Marshal) Montgomery, who led the British campaign in North Africa during World War II.

**Stanza 8.** The 'Afrika Korps' was the German General Rommel's army opposing Monty and the British Eighth Army. At the Second Battle of El Alamein in 1942 the British secured a breakthrough and ultimately victory in North Africa. Tanks played a leading role in the battle.

'Pro Rommel, pro mori' is an adaptation of '*dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori*' ('it is sweet and right to die for one's country'), from an ode by Horace. The tag was used by Wilfred Owen in 1917-18 as the title to his famous anti-war poem 'Dulce et

Decorum Est', which ended by calling the saying 'The old Lie'. Plunkett's ungrammatical play on the words means roughly 'For Rommel, for dying'.

**Stanza 9.** 'Napoleonic cognacs' (epitomising France) and 'Beefeater's gin' (representing England. Beefeaters are the ceremonial warders of the Tower of London) summarise the struggle for St Lucia between those countries.

**Stanzas 9-10.** 'olives' and 'melon' continue the Greek/Caribbean parallels.

**Stanza 10.** 'Pro honoris causa' is Plunkett again being ungrammatical with his Latin. The 'Pro' is redundant, 'honoris causa' meaning 'for the sake of honour', the phrase used when awarding an honorary degree. In 1989, while working on *Omeros*, Walcott received two of his numerous honorary degrees, from Hartwick College, New York State and from Trinity College, Dublin.<sup>77</sup>

**Stanza 12.** 'white-jacketed' has many levels to it. The waiters wear white jackets, they have been put into jackets by whites, their jackets make them 'white enough' to be acceptable as servants, they have adopted white ways... Baugh and Nepaulsingh write of Walcott's 'inexhaustible interweaving of webs of metaphorical associations' (in *Another Life*).<sup>78</sup>

The choice of the archaic 'servitor' makes a comment on the out-dated situation at the club.

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<sup>77</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott, A Caribbean Life*, pp. 488 and 489.

<sup>78</sup> Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh, *Derek Walcott, Another Life, fully annotated*, p. 170.

The 'Raj' was rule in India by the British Crown between 1857 and 1947.

**Stanza 13.** 'pukka' means '*proper(ly made)*', a Hindi term picked up during the Raj and used without irony among ex-patriates to imply socially-acceptable behaviour, accent, dress etc. Normally pronounced in English as a trochee, here it scans as a spondee to reflect the ironic thrust of 'phony', giving a long-drawn, almost drawled second syllable as '*pukkaaah*', an ironic exaggeration of how the ex-pats would have said it. This picks up the other comments on class (or 'clarse') in the following three stanzas.

Walcott almost certainly intended the pun of 'phony' with '*phonetic*'. 'phony pukka' is, of course, an oxymoron.

The opening couplet of this stanza with its rhyme 'car/pukka' ends a run of perfect rhymes. In the next three stanzas, which deal with the false pretences of the club members, the rhymes are all more loose (even 'Lancashire', which Plunkett would have pronounced in the British – Lancashur - rather than the American way – Lancashyr, does not rhyme with 'liar'). The final rhyme in this passage is imperfect masculine (were, Victoria). This reading requires an exaggerated '*aah*' on 'Victoria' similar to the accentual change in 'pukka', as the denizens of the club would have pronounced it. Walcott's ear is true.

**Stanza 15.** 'irrepressible Cockney' is a cliché Walcott uses knowingly, underlining the commonness of the club members.

**Stanza 16.** ‘red-kneed’ refers to the pale, sun-reddened knees showing below their dresses, but also echoes the Red-kneed Tarantula (*Brachypelma smithi*), the female of which outlives her mates, sometimes by eating them. ‘cutlery/spilled’ takes their accents down the social scale from the ‘*cut-glass*’ epithet that is normally applied to upper-class English accents.

**Stanza 22.** ‘Tobruk’ was another major battle in the North African campaign, when the British were besieged for some 9 months by the Germans and Italians under Rommel.

**Stanza 24.** ‘Tommies’. ‘Tommy’ or ‘Tommy Atkins’ was the accepted term for the common infantryman in the British army from the nineteenth century onwards. The term has gradually fallen out of use, its modern equivalent ‘*squaddy*’ in England. Though the term is one Plunkett would have used, there may be some incidental resonances for Walcott. The term was used first as early as 1743, in a letter sent from Jamaica about a mutiny amongst the troops.<sup>79</sup> The surname Atkins means ‘*little Adam*’, ‘*Adam*’ itself meaning ‘*red earth*’, a reference to the soldiers’ red tunics. The name Thomas means ‘*twin*’. All relate to Walcott, the ‘red nigger’ of ‘*The Schooner Flight*’,<sup>80</sup> a twin who has written of his Adamic situation.

**Stanza 25.** ‘His white nurse’ is a memory of Maud in her hospital uniform when they first met, but also seems a feminine equivalent to ‘*his white knight*’, the unstated saviour of his sanity. ‘His officer’ is the first of many signs of the love and

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<sup>79</sup> Imperial War Museum website <<http://collections.iwm.org.uk/server/show/ConWebDoc.1262>> [accessed 5 Jan 2010]

<sup>80</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Star Apple Kingdom*, p. 4.

dependence Plunkett feels for Maud, despite other evidence of his harsh treatment of her.

*Chapter V, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 1-4.** The masculine rhymes are in keeping with the male bonding in the opening line.

**Stanza 1.** Short phrases, alliteration (first on ‘c’, then ‘h’, then ‘st’, then ‘t’) and onomatopoeia (‘stitched in staccato succession’) convey rapid action and the sound of the German Messerschmitt fighter’s machine gun. The image of ‘miniature palms/along the top of the trench’ is Walcott the painter at work and is echoed in XLIV/i/12 as ‘tiny brooms/of palms on the ridges.’ Such echoes are characteristic of the poem. The first example is also reminiscent of Brodsky’s ‘Explosions that sprout a palm tree!’, from his 1983 poem ‘Variation in V’.<sup>81</sup>

This occurrence of ‘stitched’ is the only negative image of sewing in the poem. The many other uses all tend to be associated with healing wounds. Here it is the wound (the trench) that is good and the stitching that is bad.

**Stanza 3.** ‘Kraut’ was a derogatory English term for German (here meaning ‘Nazi’), used mainly but not exclusively by the Americans during the Second World War. The British were more likely to use the term ‘Jerry’ in that war, though Kraut was also

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<sup>81</sup> Joseph Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), p. 311

used. 'Kraut' is a contraction of 'sauerkraut', the pickled cabbage eaten by mid-Europeans.

**Stanza 6.** The repetition of 'noise' from Stanza 4 is ironic, underlining the lack of war's bloody reality in the club atmosphere.

**Stanzas 6-7.** Walcott appears in the poem for the first time, not as the 'Phantom narrator' but as himself-as-author. This self-referential acknowledgement of the authorial and narratorial roles will find echoes elsewhere in the poem.

The interlacing of normal and reverse *terza rima* in the previous two stanzas is repeated, perhaps to mark Walcott's weaving himself into the poem.

Two major elements in Walcott's thinking are introduced: the idea that Caribbean peoples (whether descendants of persecuted native Americans, of slaves, of indentured workers or, even, of colonisers) share a wound, their separation from their roots and in most cases from their history, and the other idea that we 'write' ourselves and are not what others then read in us.

'Plain men. Not striking. Not handsome.' Plunkett values these qualities because he identifies with them as Everyman, salt of the earth, witness to History (see XIX/iii/13).

**Stanza 12.** 'where what they called history could not happen' Again this section points up a major Walcott theme, that epic-heroic history (conquests and battles) is

not the history that the Caribbean needs. Baugh analyses Walcott's distinction between history (what happened) and History ('an ideological construct that has served the purposes of a colonial discourse'). The latter is what Walcott rejects.<sup>82</sup>

**Stanzas 13-15.** 'the Battle of the Saints' was a decisive battle between a British fleet under Admiral Sir George Rodney (1719-1792) and a French fleet under the Comte de Grasse in 1782. It took place at the Saintes, a group of islands between Dominica and Guadeloupe, north of St Lucia. See note to XV/i/1 for more detail on the battle.

In these three stanzas Walcott moves the timeline of Plunkett's reverie from the Second World War to a 'present' contemplation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and then a 'present' memory of Maud's younger self, then back again to a 'present' that is itself a memory of Maud's older self. Such disjointed timelines are also written larger in the development of the main narratives (see also LVIII/ii/6 'he plays tricks with time').

**Stanza 15.** 'my crown' The rank badge of a Regimental Sergeant Major included a crown.

'my desert's white lily' could be a reference to the desert lily (*Hesperocallis undulata*) of the Sonoran and Mojave deserts and Baja California or may be simply metaphorical. The metaphorical sense is, she brightens his otherwise barren life, but there are resonances. Hesperus (Roman Vesper) is the evening star, Venus, ideal of beauty. The white-flowered desert lily is the only species in its genus, unique, as

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<sup>82</sup> Edward Baugh, *Derek Walcott*, p. 12.

Plunkett sees Maud. '*undulata*' refers to the wave-like margin of the leaves, a sea-connection for Walcott.

The lily is an emblem of virtue and chastity and associated with the Virgin Mary in Christian iconography. Plunkett elsewhere (LXI/i/12-15) puts his wife-to-be on a virginal pedestal, one she occupies unwillingly. See also the note to X/iii/11 concerning the Joy of Sex.

**Stanza 16.** The stress-count is only 5 on the final line, the missing stress reflecting the sense.

*Chapter V, Section iii.*

**Stanza 1.** 'that Madonna bathing her baby' may be a picture in the bar but could at the same time be a reference to an earlier 1973 work by Dunstan St Omer, Walcott's friend. St Omer decorated Jacmel church just above the Roseau valley, also Castries cathedral, and, with his sons, many other churches. The image of 'his little shrimp thing' is echoed later in XLIX/ii/11 'the first clay's innocent prick'.

**Stanza 2.** See note to LVIII/i/9-10 re casinos on St Lucia.

**Stanza 3.** Walcott's choice of yellow for the dress that becomes iconic in the poem reminds of the autobiographical 'Light of the World', where he lusts after a girl in yellow bodice and yellow shorts.<sup>83</sup> The yellow butterfly *Argante Giant Sulphur* is

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<sup>83</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Arkansas Testament*, p. 49.



commonly found in Central America and on St Lucia and is known for migrating great distances. In 1958, in 'A Lesson for this Sunday', Walcott wrote of a small girl in a lemon dress catching and pinning a yellow butterfly.<sup>84</sup>

**Stanza 4.** 'triangular sails' is a reminder of the Triangular Trade to be dealt with in Book 3 onward. It is also apposite to Helen's relationship with Achille and Hector.

**Stanza 6.** The alliteration on 'V' underlines the visual point, and also refers back to the triangular sails in line 2.

**Stanza 7.** The 'f's in 'drift like a waif' have an onomatopoeic quality, as if a puff of wind were blowing her.

**Stanza 8.** Walcott makes a self-referential comment, in the guise of Plunkett.

The 6 repetitions of 'ess' or 'es' extend the sense of 'hopelessness' through the entire stanza.

**Stanza 9.** 'Seychelles. Seashells.' Plunkett makes a slightly tipsy play on his thoughts about Maud's arm, his watching of Helen and the tongue-twister: '*she sells seashells by the sea-shore*'. His play contains other associations: The Seychelles are a distant twin of St Lucia, won by the English from the French and having both languages and a French Creole. They have an English education system and a French culture. Many other aspects of the islands' life are similar to St Lucia's.

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<sup>84</sup> Derek Walcott, 'A Lesson for this Sunday' (Kingston: *Caribbean Quarterly* Vol 38 No 4, December 1992), p. 17.

The second line is a rare 7 stress line, echoing the sense of 'piling up'.

Plunkett's reverie through most of the rest of this section is almost a stream of consciousness.

**Stanzas 10-15.** Plunkett reflects on the final collapse of the British Empire, beginning with the independence of India in 1947, to be followed over the next fifty years by that of most of the other territories Britain had ruled.

In 1956, in collusion with France and Israel, Prime Minister Anthony Eden launched a British attack against Egypt to thwart its nationalisation of the vital Suez Canal. The attempt ended in failure and ignominy after pressure to withdraw from the USA and Russia.

**Stanza 16.** St Lucia's (Helen's) history is Plunkett's illusory quest. The loss of African history through the Middle Passage is a major theme of much Caribbean writing. Walcott will take us from retrospective yearning for an African home to recognition that history is not what is needed but acceptance of all of the past and a hopeful concentration on a present surrounded by the timeless sea. He said, '... a lot of people exploit an idea of Africa out of both the wrong kind of pride and the wrong kind of heroic idealism...there is a great danger in historical sentimentality. We are prone to this because of suffering, of slavery...take in the fact of slavery, if you're capable of it, without bitterness, because bitterness is going to lead to the fatality of

thinking in terms of revenge. A lot of the apathy in the Caribbean is based on this historical sullenness.<sup>85</sup>

**Stanza 17.** ‘historic hallucination’ The modern Helen’s name calls to Plunkett’s mind all of the metaphorical associations of her Greek counterpart, abducted to Troy. Begging or seeking work plaiting hair, she wanders the battlefield from one fallen Greek soldier to the next.

‘hallucination’ comes from a Latin root meaning to wander (as Helen does here), but now means to see things not there (as Plunkett does). Walcott may also have liked the resonances of *halo* and *St Lucia*, as well as the butterfly’s distant allusion to Dante’s Odysseus/Ulysses the wanderer, in his *folle volo* (*Inferno* XXVI.125).

A ‘myrmidon’ was a Greek warrior, of a tribe commanded by Achilles. However, their mythic origin was as a race of brave soldiers created by Zeus from ants. The alternative meaning ‘*ant-people*’ gives Plunkett an ironic slant on the sprawling tourists.

**Stanza 20.** ‘its bushy tunnel and its penile cannon’ The sexual imagery reflects the lust to possess of the French and English.

**Stanzas 21-22.** Plunkett feels post-colonial guilt over the exploitation of the island and its people. Walcott often spoke out against the danger in white guilt and black victimhood, both enervating of West Indian potential (see LIV/i/15-16).

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<sup>85</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Edward Hirsch 1985, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 114.

**Stanza 24.** 'Gibraltar of the Caribbean' refers to the Brimstone Hill Fort built from 1690 onwards by the British on St Kitts. Subsequently captured by the French it was returned to Britain under the Treaties of Versailles 1763-4.

**Stanza 25.** The change of hands from French to British control or back meant a change from one religion to another, Roman Catholicism or Protestantism, and a different set of prayers. Walcott suffered from the continuing enmity of these doctrines in his youth, a Methodist in a Catholic-dominated education system.

**Stanza 30.** Plunkett sees the absurdity of the Greek associations he has conjured up. This is a conclusion that Walcott/the Narrator will take most of the book to arrive at (see LXIV/ii/8-10).

**Stanzas 30-33.** The whole section treats the rivalry of Hector and Achilles, one or the other gaining temporary dominance. It is therefore filled with 'or' sounds, ten in as many lines.

**Stanza 30.** The Parthenon is the temple of Athene in the Acropolis, the citadel of Athens. A crown of laurel (or olive) leaves went to the winner of the Olympic games, (*victor ludorum* in Latin). Walcott is using the terms 'Aegean', 'Parthenon' and 'Olympiad' as archetypes and cheerfully mixes his locations (Olympia is some 150 miles from Athens, and on the Adriatic rather than Aegean side of Greece).

**Stanza 31.** ‘The Latin syllables would drown/in the clapping dialect of the crowd’

Walcott prefigures his own conclusion, later in the poem, that classical survivals lose their power when set against the vital reality of the island. The phrase and the reference to a crown in the previous stanza have resonances with T. S. Eliot’s in ‘Little Gidding’, the fourth part of *Four Quartets*:

Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us  
to purify the dialect of the tribe  
and urge the mind to aftersight and foresight,  
let me disclose the gifts reserved for age  
to set a crown upon your lifetime’s effort.<sup>86</sup>

The resonance with Eliot in *Omeros* will not end with this. The Dantesque passage in *Four Quartets* includes a compound ghost in whom Eliot suggested Yeats, Mallarmé, Swift and Poe might be seen.<sup>87</sup>

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## ***Chapter VI.***

Helen is pregnant but does not know if Achille or Hector is the father. She (symbol of the island) must decide whether to accept change or not. The Narrator falls under Helen’s spell and sees her through metaphors that are both African (‘a pantheress’) and classical Greek and therefore European (‘filly of Menelaus’).

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<sup>86</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T S Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 194.

<sup>87</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Abacus/Sphere Books, 1985), p. 271.

*Chapter VI, Section i.*

**Stanzas 1-4.** Taking its metaphor from a Greek vase, the passage states the timelessness of human activity and the ultimate anonymity of ‘foam-sprinters’, the ordinary actors in what is called History. The search for fame is mocked. What endures is merely a silhouette of the person. The relevance to the preceding passage at V/iii/30-33, where Achille and Hector vied with each other, is underlined by the ‘or’ that recurs in lines 3 to 6.

**Stanza 6-12.** Helen recounts how she refused to be exploited by the tourists. By LXIV/ii/1 onwards, she is to be found waitressing again at the Halcyon Hotel, demurely dressed and mistress of her situation.

This section has Helen speaking the most sustained passage of English Creole in the whole poem.

**Stanza 11.** ‘I pregnant,/but I don’t know for who.’ is Helen the island as much as Helen the waitress. Is she carrying Hector’s child (the go-getting St Lucian transport driver) or Achille’s (the traditional fisherman)? Will the island be inherited by its European ‘genes’ or its African ones? King has this dilemma also as a more personal one for Walcott, who was hurt that Norline his third wife miscarried and yet had a child by another man.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott, A Caribbean Life*, p. 407.

Helen will not have felt alone in her condition. Father Gachet reported in 1975, 'With regard to the problem of illegitimacy one may note that, whilst the percentage of lawful births [in St Lucia] was about 60% at the beginning of the century, it went down to 50% after 1930, 45% after 1950 and 35% or less in recent years.'<sup>89</sup> See also Ma Kilman's comments on Maljo in LXIII/i/5-6.

*Chapter VI, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 1-3.** Walcott drops into the historical or dramatic present for this section, signalling its importance.

**Stanzas 1-2.** 'Change burns' where the rubbish tip smoulders, the dump from the tourist hotels.

'divides the smoke with a sword' is a direct reference to Philoctete's curse in IV/i/10-11 'When cutlass cut smoke.../ black people go get rest from God'. The symbolism is of dividing the smoke of history and walking her own path. At the same time, the Narrator abandons white Helen for her black shadow, underlining that the choice is one to be made today, by black St Lucia.

The 'black piglets' form other 'white-to-black' transformations of the myth. They represent Odysseus' crew under the spell of Circe (*The Odyssey* Book 10)<sup>90</sup>, living on the leavings of the tourist trade, but also the sign to Aeneas of a white sow and her

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<sup>89</sup> Charles Gachet FMI, *A History of the Roman Catholic Church in St Lucia*, p.341.

<sup>90</sup> Martin Hammond, (translator) *Homer: The Odyssey*, p. 99.

piglets, showing where he should found his new settlement in Italy (Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 3, lines 508-11).

**Stanza 3.** The idea of making a mark in sand harks back to the Crusoe metaphor in Walcott's earlier writings (*The Castaway* 1965, *Pantomime* 1978, *the Isle is Full of Noises* 1982), where the history-less beach wiped clean by the sea is there for the Caribbean castaways to make of it what they will. This is Walcott's resolution of the post-colonial sense of rootlessness: History leaves no trace here, so you can write your own future.

The lyric is the popular Beatles one, 'Yesterday', from their 1965 album *Help!* The use of it by Helen is ironic, given its continuation, 'Oh, I believe in yesterday'. By the end of the poem, this would be the last message Walcott would consider giving, but for the present it is to trigger the Narrator's classical reverie.

### ***Chapter VI, Section iii.***

**Stanzas 4-10.** The Narrator drifts with the smoke into a reverie fuelled by his classical obsession. By having Helen rather than himself remember it, he sets her firmly in the myth he has built around her.

**Stanzas 6, 7, 8 and 10.** The repeated 'yesterday' picks up the catch-line from the Beatles song Helen was crooning in Stanza 3. Walcott uses the device to shuffle time, interweaving Trojan and modern images until they seem contemporaneous, or timeless.



**Stanza 6.** ‘the Scamander’ is the largest river in the plain of Troy (in modern Turkey).<sup>91</sup> It was revered as a river-god.

**Stanza 8.** ‘Barrel of Beef’ (Barrel O’Beef) is a low rock off Rodney Bay in the approaches to Gros Îlet. It is now a marine reserve.<sup>92</sup> A barrel of salted beef used to contain 200 pounds of meat.<sup>93</sup>

**Stanza 10.** ‘common horizon’ ‘sea without time’ Walcott sees the sea as outside time and tying together the Old World and the New. At the end of the poem it is the sea that will still be going on.

In Greek myth ‘the Argonauts’ were the crew of the Argo, led by Jason. Their quest to find and win the Golden Fleece took them to Colchis on the Black Sea. Many hypotheses exist for the origin of the myth, including the one reported by Strabo, that fleecy skins were used in the area in alluvial mining for gold, the gold-bearing deposits being washed over the fleece and the gold grains then sticking to it.<sup>94</sup>

**Stanza 12.** The alliteration on ‘t’ emphasises the sharpness of Helen’s tongue.

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<sup>91</sup> *Atlas of the Greek and Roman World in Antiquity* ed. by Nicholas G L Hammond (Park Ridge NJ: Noyes Press, 1981), Map 5.

<sup>92</sup> <[http://www.mpaglobal.org/index.php?action=showSpatial&site\\_code=32752](http://www.mpaglobal.org/index.php?action=showSpatial&site_code=32752)> [accessed 8 Nov 2010]

<sup>93</sup> <<http://www.unc.edu/~rowlett/units/dictB.html>> [accessed 8 Nov 2010]

<sup>94</sup> Strabo, *Geography* tr. by Horace Leonard Jones (Cambridge Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 1928), Vol V., p. 215.

**Stanza 16.** Helen is seen as a panther (black, rather than the black on white markings of the leopard). Her rage is ancestral, pure. The images in this stanza match Pound's 'caged panther's eyes'.<sup>95</sup>

**Stanza 18.** 'a mask or a T-shirt' represent an empty mimicry of Africa and the Americanisation of the Caribbean. Walcott seeks a third way.

**Stanza 19.** Walcott chooses to split an infinitive, embodying the 'leap' in the slight pause that follows the phrase, whereas 'to leap lightly...' would stress the lightness of the leap.

**Stanza 20.** The end of this stanza is reminiscent of the end of Section VII of Heaney's *Station Island*, 'he trembled like a heatwave and faded.'<sup>96</sup>

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## ***Chapter VII.***

Helen and Achille quarrel at the market and she leaves with Hector. Achille had seen them together at the redoubt and suspected an affair. The Narrator also feels that his love (Walcott's marriage) is beginning to crumble.

### ***Chapter VII, Section i.***

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<sup>95</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 530.

<sup>96</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 80.

**Stanzas 1-4.** The imagery is intensely painterly, all of the metaphors based on how things look.

**Stanza 1.** ‘The iron roar of the market’ is a louder echo of St.-John Perse’s *Éloges*:  
‘in the center of the Market of bronze, high, exasperated abode where fishes hang and that can be heard singing in its sheet of tin’.<sup>97</sup>

**Stanzas 2-3.** ‘the curled heads of cabbages/crammed on a tray to please implacable Caesars’ evokes the cramped conditions in the slave ships, where slaves were squeezed into two-high racks between decks, to the indifference of the captains, whose only concern was to carry as many as possible short of killing them off. A captain could receive a bonus (4 slaves for every 104 delivered alive, in one case). The ship’s doctor could also be on an incentive (12 pence a head in one case). Even so, death rates on voyage could be as high as 5 or 6 out of every 10 slaves taken aboard.<sup>98</sup>

**Stanza 6.** The scales are the two-pan type in which goods in one pan are weighed by the addition of weights to the other pan until the scales are horizontal. Here, no matter how ‘the iron tear of the weight’ representing compassion is added, it is never enough to level the scales against the cruelties of Antillean history, ‘but never equal’. Burnett sees in this section a reference also to the global market of today, with its continuing exploitation of the islands.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> St.-John Perse, *Éloges and Other Poems* translated by Louise Varèse (New York: Pantheon, 1956), p. 43.

<sup>98</sup> Nigel Tattersfield, *The Forgotten Trade* (London: Pimlico (Random House), 1998), pp. 146, 219 and 338.

<sup>99</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 76.

**Stanzas 7-8.** Walcott puns, linking ‘slave’ and ‘bound to show off for people’ in a hidden reference to the slave auctions that would have taken place in just such a market. The exchange shows how slavery still colours speech and sensitivities, five generations after its abolition.

**Stanza 16.** There is an internal rhyme ‘trainer, drained, contained’ whose repeated diphthong vowel suggests something broken, ‘ai’, a cry of astonishment or grief in Liddell and Scott’s Greek lexicon, often doubled ‘ai ai’.<sup>100</sup>

*Chapter VII, Section ii.*

**Stanza 5.** ‘when the wind comes about’ implies Helen’s change of heart.

**Stanzas 9-10.** It is an ironic wreath of victory that surrounds Achille’s cuckolded head.

**Stanza 15.** The ‘drowning’ of the conchs is the reverse of the fact, as is their ‘saving’ by Achille later in VIII/ii/15. The sea is their element and being out of water will kill them.

*Chapter VII, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 2-12.** The changes of pronoun are confusing at first. Baugh has commented on how, in *Another Life* and *What the Twilight Says*, ‘the “I” of the narrator-

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<sup>100</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press/Clarendon Press, 1968)

protagonist is continually changing places with the narrated “he”. Sometimes the “I” and the “he” become “you”, as intermediary between the two other selves, the “other” face in the mirror which the self acknowledges and interrogates.<sup>101</sup> Something of this ‘detachment’ can be seen in St.-John Perse’s *Pour Fêter Une Enfance*, where the second person is used, or in *Éloges*, where the third person is used.<sup>102</sup> Walcott himself said, in the original prose manuscript to *Another Life*, ‘Henceforth “I” should be known as “him” – an object distant enough to regard dispassionately...The true autobiographer will cultivate the schizophrenic gift.’<sup>103</sup>

This passage draws on the failure of Walcott’s relationship with his wife Norline. The first persons in stanzas 2-4 are completed by the metamorphosis of their new love. The suddenly distancing ‘They’ and ‘her’, seen voyeuristically when coupling in stanzas 5-6, reflect the feeling that this was something that happened to ‘others’ ‘before it gaped into a wound’ (i.e. they un-coupled). The ‘troubled and inexact’ ‘I’ that wakes next to his lover is unable quite to participate in the most tender act of all, the drawing together and acknowledgement of another. Instead, the pronoun shifts to the more impersonal ‘one’ and second person ‘you’.

The selfish need of the poet to go through the intense experiences of falling in love and breaking up, as well as the demands of building a career through extensive travel and existing in hotel rooms, may have contributed to the breakdown of Walcott’s three marriages. He had said, in 1968, ‘Now my personal life is calm and my poetry is not that involved or tormented. And everybody has a big yearning in a way, after a

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<sup>101</sup> Edward Baugh, *Derek Walcott*, p. 90.

<sup>102</sup> St.-John Perse, *Éloges and Other Poems*, pp. 15 and 47.

<sup>103</sup> Derek Walcott, manuscript to *Another Life*, (University of the West Indies Library, Mona) p. 9. quoted by Edward Baugh, ‘The Poet’s Fiction of Self’ in *The Poetics of Derek Walcott*, p. 313.

while, for being unhappy, but you can be professionally unhappy and this is what I am trying to avoid. I wouldn't like to be that!',<sup>104</sup> Another clue to reading all this is at XLVIII/i/1-13 where Walcott/the narrator talks about love and marriage: 'the love I was good at seemed to have been only/the love of my craft and nature'.

**Stanza 12.** The 'Morne' is Morne Fortune above Castries ('morne' a mound or hill in the Antilles).<sup>105</sup> The old Combermere barracks is there, together with several university and public buildings.<sup>106</sup>

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### ***Chapter VIII***

Achille goes hunting for sunken treasure to win Helen back. The evil of the Caribbean's past overwhelms him and he poaches forbidden conchs and coral instead. Philoctete fails to make peace between Hector and Achille.

### ***Chapter VIII, Section i.***

**Stanza 2.** 'Cartagena' is Cartagena de Indias, the Spanish city in Columbia that was a major centre for trade in precious metals and slaves. Between 1585 and 1599, 132 ships landed some 24,000 slaves at the port.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Dennis Scott 1968, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 114.

<sup>105</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

<sup>106</sup> St Lucia map (1:25000) *Series E803 (D.O.S. 345) Sheet 1 – St Lucia, edition 5-D.O.S.1981* (Lands and Survey Department, Castries, St Lucia)

<sup>107</sup> Maria del Carmen Borrego Plá, *Cartagena de Indias en el Siglo XVI* (Seville: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos de Sevilla, 1983), pp. 58-61.

**Stanzas 4-5.** *Ville de Paris* was the flagship of the French Admiral Comte de Grasse (1722-1788) at the Battle of the Saints (1782). The French lost to the British under Admiral Sir George Rodney and the *Ville de Paris* surrendered. It sank with all hands but one off Newfoundland five months later. Walcott is drawing out the thread of associations that will lead to Plunkett's obsession with the Battle later in the poem.

**Stanza 9.** 'shilling' was a silver English coin (equivalent to the present 5p) prior to the decimalisation of the currency, when 12 pence = 1 shilling and 20 shillings = 1 pound. Also used as a name for currency in other countries.

**Stanzas 15-16.** The section finishes with the interweaving of a normal and a 'reverse' *terza rima* tercet. This device appears elsewhere (IX/iii/24-25, XIII/iii/13-14, XXVII/ii/10-11) and is an alternative to other forms for the last two tercets of a section, such as quatrain-plus-couplet. There seems to be no significance in the choice.

'What good...warmed him once' reminds of the West Indian proverb: 'Money can buy water, but it can't buy rain' meaning it can buy a woman's favours but not her love'.<sup>108</sup>

The alliteration on 'f' as he goes down mimics the shape of an anchor.

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<sup>108</sup> Lito Valls, *Ole Time Sayin's: Proverbs of the West Indies*, saying no. 497.

The ‘moidores’ (Portugese ‘moeda de oro’/‘coin of gold’) and ‘doubloons’ (Spanish coin, originally worth two pistols hence ‘doble’ ‘double’) were some of the coinage carried by galleons across the Caribbean.<sup>109</sup>

*Chapter VIII, Section ii.*

**Stanza 9.** The alliteration on ‘b’ is onomatopoeic, representing the gurgling of the coral.

**Stanza 14.** ‘Once more the whelk/was his coin, his bank the sea-conch’s.’ Walcott combines visual and aural imagery, the round coin of the whelk finding an echoing chink in the following phrase. The unity of the sentence comes from its consonants, every key vowel sound being different.

**Stanza 16.** The alliteration on ‘f’ mimics the anchor’s shape again.

*Chapter VIII, Section iii.*

**Stanza 2.** The common bond of the sea binds more than the fishermen. For Walcott, it is what links the Caribbean archipelago and what ties Africa to the Caribbean.

**Stanza 3.** ‘Like Hector. Like Achilles’ The English form of the names, rather than the Creole, signals that these are the Greek heroes to whom Hector and Achille are being compared. This comparison means that the St Lucian fishermen and the Greeks

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<sup>109</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press/Clarendon, 1933)



are separate and that *Omeros* is not a Caribbean resetting of Homer's tale (as some expected) but a modern dilemma which parallels the myth.

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## *Chapter IX*

The hurricane strikes. Achille is caught by the storm, but makes it home to lie awake thinking of Helen and Hector. Hector loses his battle to save his canoe, symbolic of his forthcoming move to taxi-driving. A folk-tale account of the Cyclone brings in the names of African gods and Voodoo spirits alongside European Neptune and Zeus.

### *Chapter IX, Section i.*

**Stanzas 1-9.** There is a resonance between Achille's work and that of Eumaios, Odysseus' faithful swineherd in the *Odyssey* (book 14). However, Achille does not share the latter's feelings of care for his charges.

**Stanzas 5 and 9.** Dochmiac figures convey the crisis: 'of soft, squelchy clay', 'a braced sea-rock streaming'. The same stanzas mark with their rhymes the end of a paragraph, stanzas 6 and 10 marking the beginning of a new quatrain of rhymes and a new thought.

**Stanzas 12-13.** Walcott takes an artist's view of the island in rain, a scroll painted with Chinese images. At the same time, he modifies his language to short flat phrases that sound like the titles of Zen pictures. There is strong similarity between Zen's

concentration on the 'isness' of things, the essential reality, and Walcott's aim in this book to see St Lucia as it really is. 'Bamboo stroke' is the name of one of the 'Four Gentlemen', the four basic strokes in Chinese painting or the Japanese *sumi-e* style.<sup>110</sup>

**Stanza 16.** 'Coleman lanterns' are kerosene-, gasoline- or propane-fuelled lanterns made by that company since the early 1900's. The gas-fuelled ones are more efficient than kerosene lamps. Ma Kilman's lamp is gas-fuelled (note that 'gas' here may mean gasoline or propane) (see Stanza 18) but Achille's is the cheaper kerosene one (see Stanza 17).<sup>111</sup>

**Stanza 19.** 'splashing the palms' is an intensely visual image, catching the momentary spread of the branches against a sky cracked by lightning. It shows how Walcott's artist eye can catch an image in an instant and recalls a similar moment from V/ii/1.

**Stanza 24.** 'galvanize' is zinc-coated iron used for roofing and other construction. The coating helps rust-proof the metal. Commonly called 'tin roof', or in Britain 'corrugated iron' because the metal is bent into undulations for added strength. See also XII/i/2. Michael Ondaatje has a book of poems called *Tin Roof* and Tennessee Williams a play, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

**Stanza 25.** The stanza is full of ternary feet. Achille contemplates the triangle of himself, Hector and Helen.

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<sup>110</sup> <<http://www.japan-101.com/art/sumi.htm>> [accessed 24 April 2010]

<sup>111</sup> <<http://www.coleman.com/coleman/ColemanCom>> [accessed 8 Nov 2010]

*Chapter IX, Section ii.*

**Stanza 1.** The loosening of the anchor-rope is symbolic of Hector's condition, for with the loss of his canoe, he loses his grounding, the trade as a fisherman that defined him. Cut off from the sea he loves, he is, ironically, all at sea.

**Stanzas 1-9.** Walcott suits the rhyme scheme to the storm turning everything upside down. After an opening quatrain of rhymes (sea/rope/mercilessly/grope) followed by a *terza rima* group (troughs/house/close) the waves in stanza 3 turn everything to the reverse *terza rima* form *aba cac dcd* etc (afraid/boat/about, weight/white/wet, oar/ashore/more, under/thunder/founder). Only when Hector regains control in stanza 8 does the *terza rima* return to normal (while/wall/will).

*Chapter IX, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 1-24.** The African gods appear in the storm (Shango the Oyo Yoruba god of thunder and lightning and Ogun the Ilesha Yoruba iron and blacksmith spirit<sup>112</sup>, Erzulie the voodoo spirit of love and beauty and Damballa the voodoo snake spirit<sup>113</sup>) and link up with the classical gods, Neptune and Zeus. They had been preceded by folklore figures, Lightning, Ma Rain and the Sun. Walcott the animist calls upon all of the spirits of Nature in his description of the storm. He shows the gods throwing a

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<sup>112</sup> William Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), pp. 82-84.

<sup>113</sup> Henry Gilfond, *Voodoo: Its Origins and Practices* (New York, London: Franklin Watts, 1976), pp 3-5 and 19-21.

fete, a hurricane-party. Lightning is the stilt walker Moko Jumbie from Trinidad  
Carnival, a survival of village gods from the Congo or Nigeria.<sup>114</sup>

In the Shango cult in the Lesser Antilles, the Yoruba spirits have been changed  
somewhat and also in some cases are identified with Christian saints, Shango (or  
Abakoso) with St. John, Ogun with St. Michael in a creolisation of religion.<sup>115</sup>  
Catholic and African pantheons were easily interlinked and Walcott has argued that  
the taking-away from the merchant and missionary of Christian mysteries by the  
Africans was just one step, together with the adaptation of the master's language,  
towards the 'new naming of things'.<sup>116</sup>

**Stanza 1.** Cyclones are tropical storms that have a central eye ('the eye of the storm')  
where there is temporary calm. The name has a common Greek root (kuklos, meaning  
circle or wheel) with Cyclops<sup>117</sup>.

**Stanzas 2, 8 and 19.** Dochmiac figures followed by unstressed syllables again  
represent crisis: 'his stilt-walking messenger', 'the harp-sighing ripple' (IX/iii/8), 'of  
brown water roaring' (IX/iii/19).

**Stanza 3.** An 'upstairs house' is a house with the living accommodation above a  
storage area and an outside staircase up to it.<sup>118</sup> (see also LXII/i/)

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<sup>114</sup> Daniel J. Crowley, *The Traditional Masques of Carnival from Trinidad Carnival Nos 3 and 4 of 1956* (Port of Spain: Paria Publishing 1988), p. 50.

<sup>115</sup> M. G. Smith, *Dark Puritan* (Kingston: University of the West Indies, 1963), pp. 136-8.

<sup>116</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Muse of History* in *What the Twilight Says*, p. 48.

<sup>117</sup> *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* ed. Patrick Hanks (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1979)

<sup>118</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies: Performance and the Emergence of Creole Culture* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 137.

**Stanza 5.** ‘coalpot’ is a small charcoal burning stove consisting of a bowl containing the grate, on a low stand.<sup>119</sup>

**Stanza 9.** Neptune is the Roman equivalent of Poseidon, the ‘Earthshaker’ in the Greek pantheon.

‘ra-ra’ is a rattle (see note to XXVI/iii/15)<sup>120</sup>.

**Stanza 12.** ‘La Comète’ A dance style unique to St Lucia, ‘lakonmet’ in Creole.

**Stanzas 12-13.** ‘Ogun can fire one with his partner Zeus’ puns on the throwing of thunderbolts and the Caribbean term for taking a shot of rum.<sup>121</sup> It is noticeable that Walcott does not include the native American god Hurucan (hurricane) in the pantheon of the storm, other than in his English form as a name for weather. To do so here might have confused the message that Europe and Africa can enjoy life together. ‘For the gods aren’t men, they get on well together’. In his earlier poem of that name he had reclaimed Hurucan as a god and not just a storm.<sup>122</sup>

**Stanza 14.** The first line is onomatopoeic, imitating the sound of the ‘chac-chac’ (see note to XXVI/iii/15)

**Stanza 22.** Joni Mitchell’s popular song *Big Yellow Taxi*, contains the words: ‘And a big yellow tractor came and/ Pushed around my house/ Pushed around my land/ And I

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<sup>119</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

<sup>120</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

<sup>121</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

<sup>122</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Fortunate Traveller* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982) and *Collected Poems 1948-1984*, p. 423

said, don't it always seem to go/You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone/They paved paradise/And put up a parking lot.'<sup>123</sup> The song is in keeping with Walcott's concerns about over-development of the island.

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## *Chapter X*

The Plunketts sit out the storm, getting on each other's nerves and then making up in tears. After the storm they tour the west coast of the island, viewing it with love, seeing the pernicious effects of poverty and of development. All seems redeemed by Nature, but that is not the real world.

### *Chapter X, Section i.*

**Stanza 2.** Tree metaphors are common with Walcott. Here he compares the lightning to the aerial roots put down by mangroves and banyans, a painterly image.

**Stanza 6.** Maud's 'tapestry of birds' will remain a metaphor throughout the book. See Critical Introduction: Symbolism for comment on it signifying the many races and languages of the island. She parallels Penelope, wife of the absent Odysseus, who for 3 years wove a shroud for her father-in-law Laertes as a device to put off unwanted suitors. Walcott makes the Odyssean association explicit in LII/iii/2 by referring to Maud's husband Plunkett as 'that khaki Ulysses', Ulysses being the Roman name for Odysseus.

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<sup>123</sup> <<http://www.lyrics-now.com/J/Joni-Mitchell-lyrics/Miles-Of-Aisles/Big-Yellow-Taxi.shtml>> [accessed 24 April 2010]

**Stanza 7.** See note to Stanzas 15-16 for possible significance in ‘felt she was drifting away’.

**Stanza 9.** George Frederick Watts (1817-1904) in *Found Drowned* (1848-50) painted such a suicide. He is said to have based the painting on Thomas Hood’s 1844 poem *The Bridge of Sighs*.<sup>124</sup> Walcott may have known the poem, or come across the picture in the Watts Gallery near Guildford. Watts also painted *Paolo and Franscesca* from Dante’s *Inferno V* (in the same gallery) and this may have been of interest to Walcott. The Hood poem begins:

One more Unfortunate,  
Weary of breath,  
Rashly importunate,  
Gone to her death!<sup>125</sup>

**Stanza 10.** This stanza marks a break in the rhyme scheme, one of many examples of the paragraphic nature of the rhyming, which frequently switches as one idea is ended and another starts. Walcott commented ‘... if you write some sections later, to connect it like a long domino backwards, sometimes if a rhyme is missing I regret it..’, as here in line 3, ‘last’.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> <<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/watts/paintings/king.html>> [accessed 9 Nov 2010]

<sup>125</sup> Thomas Hood, *Poems of Thomas Hood (The World’s Classics)* (London, New York, Toronto, Melbourne: Henry Frowde/Oxford University Press, 1907), p. 167.

<sup>126</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Luigi Sampietro, *Caribana* 3

**Stanza 14.** ‘Bendemeer’s Stream’ was part of *Lalla Rookh*, written in 1817 by Thomas Moore (1779-1852), though the tune is better known these days for the lyrics written about 1900 by Percy French (‘The Mountains of Mourne’). Moore was referring to a stream that ran through the ruined Persian city of Persepolis. The original lyrics begin ‘There’s a bower of roses by Bendemeer’s stream’ and are nostalgic for a time and place that cannot be regained.

**Stanzas 15-16.** The whole section is in strict hexameter, but here Walcott introduces two 5-stress lines within the 12-syllable frame. The closing of the page of the nostalgic ‘Airs from Erin’ and ‘very carefully’ hiding it under velvet are symbolic of her gently subordinating to his wishes her desire to return to Ireland. The significance of this may be seen in Walcott’s situation at this time, left by his wife Norline and travelling alone in the States while she was in the West Indies.

If this reading is correct, the next two stanzas also resonate: ‘No fool like an old fool’ and ‘the old wound in his head’ (Stanza 17), ‘Easy excuse’ and ‘It was like original sin’ (Stanza 18), reflecting his anger and guilt at his treatment of her. See also Stanzas 7 and 21.

**Stanzas 18-19.** There appears to be a missing word ‘tom’ after ‘The ginger’. If this is not a typographical error it may draw attention to the repeated ‘Major?/Major we going.’ The last transmission from Major Tom in David Bowie’s 1969 hit song is ‘Tell my wife I love her very much’ and receives the response ‘She knows’.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> <<http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/major-tom-lyrics-david-bowie/e3222d90229f2fe848256e07000b9c03>> [accessed 6 Nov 2010]



**Stanza 21.** This too has an autobiographical hint.

*Chapter X, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 5, 9, 19 and 27** are all examples of where Walcott's paragraphic structuring of the sense coincides with the ending of one set of rhymes and the start of another.

**Stanzas 4 and 10.** Bilharzia was prevalent in the area, due to reliance on streams for drinking water. Standpipes were few and often broken. Cul de Sac Valley was the location of a long-running study to control and reduce the disease through killing off the snails the parasite depends on for its life cycle. Hookworm is another parasite prevalent in the region, though more so in Africa.

**Stanzas 3-5.** History brings poverty, disease, exploitation. Plunkett/ Walcott's vision is bleak.

**Stanza 8.** A '*gardeuse*' (literally 'herder' or 'keeper' as in cowherd, shepherd) is a guardian of her people.

A sybil (or sibyl) is an oracle, fortune teller or prophetess.

Obeah is the practice of an African system of magic, almost but not exactly like *voodoo* in Haiti. The obeah-man or woman works spells using simple natural aids like grave-dirt, bones, animal blood etc.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

Being all three of these gives Ma Kilman a very important place in the life of the community. She is the link with the arcane knowledge of the (African) past, protector of the present and seer of the future. She appeared in Walcott's earlier poem 'Sainte Lucie' as a figure in a supposedly Creole song.<sup>129</sup>

'a spider's knowledge' alludes to Anansi, the spider of West African and Caribbean folklore who is the embodiment of cunning. A West Indian proverb says 'Cunnin' betta dan obeah' (i.e. more powerful at getting what you want) and by giving Ma Kilman this attribute as well as her more magical powers, Walcott completes her armoury.<sup>130</sup>

**Stanzas 11-15.** The caesurae are weak in most of these lines, conveying the free-wheeling ride.

**Stanza 20.** 'Soufrière' is St Lucia's volcanic spring. The name derives from the French for 'sulphur', but has echoes of 'sufferer' as well. This fits with the idea that it is the island's wound.

**Stanza 21.** 'Malebolge' (evil pits), Dante's 8<sup>th</sup> circle of hell, where Deceivers of all kinds are punished. Only the Traitors suffer worse.

**Stanza 22.** 'zircon' is a mineral commonly found in igneous and metamorphic rocks. Walcott may be using the term here to express the colour of the gas. Zircons occur

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<sup>129</sup> Derek Walcott, *Sea Grapes* and *Collected Poems*, p. 309.

<sup>130</sup> Lito Valls, *Ole Time Sayin's: Proverbs of the West Indies*, saying no 147.

naturally in the red to yellow and blue to purple parts of the spectrum, and as colourless or black crystals.<sup>131</sup>

**Stanza 23.** ‘Auschwitz’ was the Nazi German concentration, labour and extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland. It is estimated 1.5 million Jews died there and as many Russian prisoners and others.<sup>132</sup> It is not clear whether Walcott, in mentioning lime-pits and Plunkett, is deliberately conflating Auschwitz (liberated by the Russian Army in January 1945) and Bergen-Belsen, another camp which was liberated by the British Army in April 1945 and where the British soldiers used bulldozers to shovel typhus-ridden bodies into mass graves.<sup>133</sup> It is only at the latter camp that the British Plunkett could have remembered ‘registering skulls’.

**Stanzas 26-7.** ‘the old sulphur mine’. Export of sulphur had started more than fifty years before 1836. According to a 1781 account of Soufrière:

the liquid which runs from the pits is strongly impregnated with sulphur, and resembles a good deal the preparation sold in the shops, known by the name *aqua sulphurata* or *gas sulphuris*. Before St Lucia was in our possession, two or three vessels were loaded with the crude sulphur of this volcano, for the use of America.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> <<http://www.minerals.net/mineral/silicate/neso/zircon/zircon.htm>> [accessed 17 Nov 2010]

<sup>132</sup> Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies* (London: Michael Joseph/Rainbird, 1981), p 340.

<sup>133</sup> Joanne Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 28.

<sup>134</sup> John Rollo, *Observations on the Diseases which appeared in the Army on St Lucia* (Barbados, London: Charles Dille, 1781), p. 20.

Breen has Bennett and Wood starting in 1836, with exports of 540 tons, followed by 60 tons in 1838 and 160 tons in 1840. He says the trade was then killed by a tax of 16 shillings per ton.<sup>135</sup> Walcott renames 'Wood' as 'Ward', perhaps a slip, or perhaps to give a stronger rhyme with 'upwards' in LVIII/i/1.

'bush' is more than the encroachment of wilderness. It symbolises disorder and is where spirits live.<sup>136</sup>

**Stanza 32.** 'fever grass' is a three-foot high clumped grass, smelling of lemon and with sharp leaves. Used in folk medicine.<sup>137</sup>

*Chapter X, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 1-4.** 'a shaft of light angling' resonates with Emily Dickinson's 'certain Slant of light', a negative image that Walcott translates into a positive one. For Dickinson it is Despair, changing her inside, 'where the Meanings, are', 'an imperial affliction'. For Walcott, it is the resinous woodsman, spirit of the forest who offers 'a patois blessing with old African signs' (Nature, English, French and African heritages combined) and points to the amnesiac Atlantic (the cause of memory being wiped). The passage is followed by Plunkett reflecting on his preference for St Lucia's loud-mouthed forests over England's reasonable pastures.

The slant of light is a recurring image, catching Walcott's painterly eye. See XII/i/7.

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<sup>135</sup> Henry H. Breen, *St Lucia: Historical, Statistical and Descriptive*, pp. 296-7.

<sup>136</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies*, p. 142.

<sup>137</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*.

**Stanza 1.** The woodsman is collecting snake-heads for a government bounty. It is reported that the Royal St Lucia Police Force (under the command of Major E. O. Plunkett!) in 1946 paid a bounty of one shilling each for 3,697 fer-de-lance heads handed in.<sup>138</sup> The snake is now an endangered species but is unprotected (not surprisingly perhaps, as it is aggressive and potentially deadly).

**Stanza 4.** The ‘white, amnesiac Atlantic’ reminds us that the ocean was a white man’s domain and that in crossing it, the black slaves forgot their identity, history and language, although the woodsman retains vestiges of Africa in his signs and maybe in his patois. Walcott wrote, in ‘Laventille’, of ‘some deep amnesiac blow’, the cleaving of the brain by the Middle Passage.<sup>139</sup> Burton takes issue with this, pointing to the survival of Africa in African-born slaves’ memories. However, he ignores at this point the nuances of Walcott’s position, that the amnesia is cumulative over generations and that there is a division in each descendant between the increasingly-lost culture and the imposed one. Burton does in fact go on to show how increasing creolisation reduced the vestiges of African speech.<sup>140</sup>

**Stanza 5.** The phrase ‘reasonable leaves shading reasonable earth’ echoes ‘A serious house on serious earth it is’, from Larkin’s ‘Church Going’, also a poem about returning to a place for no understandable reason.<sup>141</sup>

**Stanza 6.** ‘these loud-mouthed forests’ smacks of Browning’s ‘gaudy melon-flower’ in ‘Home Thoughts, From Abroad’, the poem that begins, ‘Oh to be in England’.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> <<http://www.rslpf.com/hist.htm>> [accessed 9 Nov 2010]

<sup>139</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Castaway and Other Poems*, p. 32.

<sup>140</sup> Richard D. E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean*, pp.19 and 27.

<sup>141</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 98.

**Stanza 11.** ‘turbanned’ may refer to the Tie-heads, Apostolic Spiritual Baptists, originating in Trinidad through the Merikens, American former slaves recruited by the British in the War of 1812 and then resettled in Trinidad, bringing the Baptist faith with them. It then spread to other islands.<sup>143</sup> The Barbadian sect was founded in 1957 by Bishop Granville Williams. The different colours worn by Tie-Heads represents the individual's specific qualities. This sect combines African and Christian practices with very energetic Christian services. The church services are characterized by up-beat music, the stomping of feet, the clapping of hands and dancing similar to many African dances.<sup>144</sup>

In ‘joy of sects’ we hear implied disapproval of gurus who exploit for both monetary and sexual reasons, but also, through the hidden reference to the 1972 sex manual by Alex Comfort,<sup>145</sup> something of Maud’s own repression or longing for a better sex life.

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## *Chapter XI*

The Plunketts at home. Dennis reflects on the qualities of the islanders and resolves to research a history for Helen, for the island. Maud reflects on her hopes for the house and an elegant life. She offers one vision of home and ‘the peace of a wandering heart when it is housed’, against Walcott/the Narrator’s despairing one in section XXXIII/iii.

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<sup>142</sup> Robert Browning, *The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning 1844-1864* (London and Toronto, Dent, 1906), p. 60.

<sup>143</sup> <<http://www.i955fm.com/ttportal/tt-directory/item/96/47.html>> [accessed 29 Jan 2012]

<sup>144</sup> <<http://www.vacation-in-barbados.com/barbados-religion.html>> [accessed 24 Sept 2010]

<sup>145</sup> Dr Alex Comfort, *The Joy of Sex* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 1972)

*Chapter XI, Section i.*

**Stanzas 1-12.** Plunkett sees the islanders as industrious, cleanly, conscientious and let down by Empire and Church. History made them what they are, but their true place in History remained to be written.

This is as succinct a statement of Walcott's views on the Empire and the (Roman Catholic) Church as is found anywhere in the poem. His disaffection with the Church began early, when his first published poem (at age 14) was criticised publicly (and in verse) by a local priest, Father Jesse, for seeking God in Nature rather than in the Word as taught by the Church. His disappointment in Empire has a double scar, inherited hurt as a descendant of slaves and inherited guilt as a descendant of colonisers. He seeks to write, not the islanders' place in History as Plunkett does, but their place in the sun, the light beyond metaphor that shows them as they really are.

Plunkett admires the islanders because (i.e. as long as) they keep themselves clean and work hard (but limit themselves to 'their own possibilities'). His wife Maud shows another, more resentful face of the coloniser.

**Stanza 6.** 'the Virgin Lamp' is a table lamp containing the image of the Virgin Mary, seen in the homes of many believers.

*Chapter XI, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 1-6.** The section contains many short sentences, particularly in Stanzas 5 and 6, conveying the sense of disjunction and isolation Maud feels.

**Stanza 2.** ‘ziggurat’ brings with it implications of Babel, when men forgot that all should be done for the glory of God. ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’ (Genesis 11:4). God confounded them, confusing their languages and scattering them. The implication here is that Plunkett is on a vain mission, his books, charts and balsa fleet unreal. His subjects are already scattered from Africa to the West Indies and speaking a confusion of languages. The term ‘ziggurat’ also links Plunkett with ‘Babylon’, decadent Western society.

**Stanza 8.** Here one of the many puns on ‘swift’ strengthens the correspondence between Maud’s sewing of the island’s birds into her quilt and Plunkett’s research, obsessions for both of them, for each a means of capturing (i.e. taking possession of) the island. Expanded, the phrase means, ‘her needles were as quick as his pen and also were a swift, as his pen was, both pecking sharply.

*Chapter XI, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 4, 6 and 8.** ‘place’ recurs three times and is reinforced by assonance. While both Maud and Dennis have been seen earlier loving the island’s natural charms, what is important to her is making a place, to be housed in a home of elegance.



**Stanza 11.** She longs for ‘the peace of a wandering heart when it is housed.’ This image adds to the poignancy of the opening of the next chapter and looks forward to Chapter XXXIII Section iii.

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## *Chapter XII*

Walcott/the Narrator returns to his childhood home and meets the shade of his father Warwick, who died when Walcott was an infant. His father passes the baton of writing and they walk the town together. The old St Lucia is a false paradise Walcott cannot believe in.

### *Chapter XII, Section i.*

**Stanza 1.** The wandering Narrator has returned to find his home now a printing shop, ironic in that Walcott had to look to Trinidad to print his first self-published volume, *25 Poems*, because there was no local printery.<sup>146</sup>

**Stanza 3.** The forbidden quilt of Walcott’s childhood is transformed in *Omeros* into Maud’s bright compendium of all the island’s birds (see notes to XVI/ii/3-7).

**Stanza 7.** Walcott jokes that the portrait was accurate, when the ghost he is comparing it to derives from his seeing the portrait.

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<sup>146</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott, A Caribbean Life*, p. 56.

**Stanzas 8-9.** Walcott said of his calling as a poet, 'it was a cherished vow taken in my young dead father's name, and my life is to honour that vow.'<sup>147</sup>

**Stanzas 11-16.** Warwick places himself as an amateur writer, his connections to 'true' but foreign 'Literature' second-hand (a distant name, a coincidental date and a sickness). His efforts are small, acid, nettling, a little sour grapes. This much might be seen as Walcott derogating his father, but for the other meaning of 'amateur', someone who writes for love not profit and his passing on of the 'Will' that is both determination and the spirit of Shakespeare.

**Stanzas 13-14.** 'Hamlet's old man' who died from a poisoned ear was murdered by Claudius. The 'parallel' referred to is therefore not a perfect one, but close enough for Walcott's imagination to shoehorn it into matching.

**Stanzas 14-15.** The grapes are a metaphor for Warwick's verses.

*Chapter XII, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 1-7.** Walcott's antipathy to the dead hand of the established Catholic church comes out in this section. The town is fixed in the 'sepia' past, 'even on Grass Street with our Methodist chapel'. A 'madhouse' and a 'convent' are bracketed. Lives are 'unshifting' while the black people go barefoot in their poverty and the church bells are 'deafening' and 'iron'. They 'rule the town'.

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<sup>147</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Leif Sjöberg, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 85.

‘Angelus’ – see note to XXIII/i/4.

King says, ‘To him Methodism and Protestantism were the modern world, even the New World, while Catholicism was the past, the Old World, but had the splendour of Renaissance art and the dark secrets rumoured of Renaissance popes.’<sup>148</sup> In this he was citing an unpublished Walcott manuscript, *Inside the Cathedral*, and comments on Walcott’s contrasting views of the splendour of the Catholic Church and the modest simplicity of the Methodist one. The manuscript is an early one and King’s brief restatement of it may not entirely reflect Walcott’s intentions. However, his lasting antipathy for the Catholic Church comes out throughout this section, and elsewhere, in XI/i/5.

**Stanza 7.** The ‘poui’ (trumpet tree or ironwood) sheds its leaves early in the year and blooms for about a week round about Easter with yellow or pink flowers, before sprouting new leaves. The fall of the poui flowers could therefore be taken here as a sign of new growth due (i.e. of imminent change) or of the death of beauty for another year, leaving only ‘a dried Easter palm’.

*Chapter XII, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 1-6.** Warwick’s other life as a colonial administrator gives a brighter (‘bluer’) image with fountains under cabbage-palms, but is not a paradise Walcott can believe in. Warwick is ambiguously a ‘white shadow’, ‘vague in its origin’ and too insubstantial to question.

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<sup>148</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott, A Caribbean Life*, p. 23.

King gives a detailed family tree and shows Warwick born out of wedlock (though his father Charles eventually married his mother Christiana). Charles was a supposedly bastard white Barbadian who came to St Lucia to buy a plantation.<sup>149</sup>

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### *Chapter XIII*

Father and son continue their walk round the town. Warwick shows that the return to Africa is no solution, then warns against Fame. He shows how Fame, like tourism, corrupts and spoils, then hands Walcott his charge, to give the ordinary-yet-noble working islanders a voice.

#### *Chapter XIII, Section i.*

**Stanzas 1-2.** The revolving barber's chair is the seat from which politics is talked, his own flagpole (the red and white symbol of the barber) a sly aside on his anarchist politics.

**Stanza 3.** *The World's Great Classics* is in fact *The World's Classics*, an imprint of Oxford University Press. Walcott uses it wrongly again at XIII/i/3 and XL/iii/8 but correctly at XXXVI/iii/14 and LII/ii/10. The reason for the variation is almost certainly to improve the scansion.

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<sup>149</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott, A Caribbean Life*, pp. 7-9.

**Stanzas 8-11.** The barber is angry at St Lucia's lack of an identity as a place, its inhabitants neither nation or people. He seeks his change from outside, as an Adventist awaiting the Second Coming and as a Garveyite anticipating a return to Africa and a uniting of all blacks. He equates the black with the Jew, who is also shunned yet human.

Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) was a black trades unionist who worked for black civil rights in the USA and eventually came to believe in segregation of the races through a Negro return to Africa. He established the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1917 (claiming over 2 million members at its peak) and in 1920 was elected by its conference to be the Provisional President of Africa. His organisation was banned by Liberia, quashing his ambitions there. Deported to Jamaica following a 1925 conviction for fraud, he failed to regain significant influence and various business ventures also failed. He wore ceremonial uniform at parades as part of his self-publicity.<sup>150</sup>

As a young man, Walcott often wondered if he had Jewish blood (from Spanish Jews who emigrated) and found the parallels between the black and Jewish diasporas interesting.<sup>151</sup>

***Chapter XIII, Section ii.***

**Stanzas 2-3.** Walcott uses the appearance of words on the page as part of his imagery. Here he sets up as emblem not just the idea 'sail' but the word with its mast

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<sup>150</sup> E. David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 42-8 and 133-145, and see photos following p. 48.

<sup>151</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott, A Caribbean Life*, p. 17.

and triangular sweep. See also the note to III/ii/1. His attraction to concrete poetry is consistent with his pleasure at playing with words evidenced in the punning and word counting in the poem (see Critical Introduction: Prosody).

**Stanzas 2-18.** Warwick warns against Fame (ironically, ‘much finer’ than anything Castries could ever aspire to) and compares its effects to those of tourism. Both look down on the poverty of the island, pollute its purity and corrupt the young into fighting for pennies. Both would eventually leave the blacks to ‘settle down to their own level’.

**Stanza 5.** ‘its pursers were milk’ could be a play on the proverb ‘you can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear’, suggesting that the liner was not as fine as it appeared.

‘the bilge/bubbling from its stern in quietly muttering troughs’ is full of scornful double meanings.

**Stanzas 6-7.** Garth St Omer describes the death of such a boy diving for coins in his story *Syrop*.<sup>152</sup>

**Stanza 7.** The ‘black cries’ of the boys emphasise that the cameras were being used by whites. Their ‘jackknife or swan dive’ suggests a black or white choice as well.

**Stanzas 11-18.** Warwick then extends the image into his boyhood, where black women were exploited in a similar fashion. Despite their nobility, they laboured in

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<sup>152</sup> Garth St Omer, *Syrop* published in *Introduction 2: Stories by New Writers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 181.

hell, their penny-loads tallied by 'white pith helmets'. The image is a negative of Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28: 11-19), with the black women angels descending into hell each time they return from carrying a load into the white heaven of the liner. In this section, Walcott allows his anger at exploitation to show through, while demonstrating that nothing has changed. The scene was described differently in 1888, when the purblind Froude saw the women as 'laughing [...] willing beasts of burden'.<sup>153</sup>

The labour of the coal carriers struck deep when Walcott saw it from his grandmother's house. He wrote of it previously in *Leaving School*,<sup>154</sup> in 'The Glory Trumpeter',<sup>155</sup> and in *Another Life*.<sup>156</sup>

**Stanza 11.** A 'torchon' is a cloth or duster, but also in Trinidad can mean a loofah. Here it may resemble the 'cotta', a pad of coiled leaves used to cushion the head.<sup>157</sup>

### *Chapter XIII, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 1-5.** Warwick's body is 'treacherous' because it failed him, dying of a mastoid infection in 1931 when Walcott was only fourteen months' old. His death leaves Walcott with unanswerable questions over the nature of the dead and about his father, and about the existence of God.

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<sup>153</sup> James Anthony Froude, *The English in the West Indies*, p. 175.

<sup>154</sup> Derek Walcott, *Leaving School*, reprinted in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott* ed. Robert D. Hamner (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1997), p.27.

<sup>155</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Castaway*, p. 25.

<sup>156</sup> Derek Walcott, *Another Life* (annotated), lines 674-689.

<sup>157</sup> Richard Allsopp. *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

**Stanza 3.** The image is one of a crouched Walcott curved like a question mark over the desk.

**Stanzas 6-14.** Like Anchises in the Aeneid, Warwick hands Walcott his sacred charge, to give a voice to the people of the island. The passage contains much self-referential detail about writing. It puns on ‘feet’ and creates then replicates the image from Stanza 7 of rhymes-as-parentheses, first in the palindromic rhythm of ‘like those groaning women will you achieve that height’ (a rhythm repeated thrice more in the next two tercets) and then in the closing two tercets, which form two *terza rima* groups, one a reflection of the other.

**Stanza 8.** The final line is iambic pentameter, entirely regular until the extra off-beat at the end. The regular pentameter form for Walcott suggests a conventional, predetermined style (‘wooden’ and maybe Eurocentric, in that it would have ‘echoes of Milton, or Tennyson – something Victorian’). It was a form he started with in *Omeros* then quickly chose to abandon, preferring the more relaxed and flexible hexameter.<sup>158</sup>

Its use in this line suggests there was a labour that had to be undertaken before his poetry could achieve its height, above the ordinary and, perhaps, the limits imposed by Old World order.

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<sup>158</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Luigi Sampietro, *Caribana 3, A Review of Caribbean Literatures* (1992/93)



***Book 2.***

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Midshipman Plunkett is spying on the Dutch empire. On St Lucia, the slaves who haul cannon up to the new Fort Rodney include Achille's ancestor Afolabe, who is renamed Achilles by the admiral for his efforts. The young Plunkett is killed in the Battle of the Saints. Major Plunkett continues his research into the battle and Maud her sewing of the quilt of birds. Plunkett catches Helen trying on Maud's jewellery. The islanders participate in an election. Helen joins the weekend celebrations, leaving Achille to brood, and shortly after moves in with Hector. Achille sets out fishing, following the sea swift, and asks himself about his origins, hallucinating about a voyage to Africa.

***Chapter XIV.***

Midshipman Plunkett travels to The Hague to spy on the Dutch merchantmen who were trading with the rebellious American colonies. Achille's ancestor Afolabe helps fortify the redoubt on Pigeon Island.

***Chapter XIV, Section i.***

**Stanza 1.** 'He knew that the way to fortify character/was by language and observation' encapsulates Walcott's twin talents as poet and artist and has about it something of the homily, a philosophy that he may have heard from his mother or Harry Simmons, the artist who took Walcott and Dunstan St Omer under his wing when they were young. See also XV/ii/4. Another less-likely possibility is that this is

another reference to the Tom Swift novels, which specialised in such aphorisms. See note to XIX/ii/4.

**Stanzas 1-5.** A series of painterly images that could have been taken from an Old Master, particularly the way light and shadow are described.

**Stanza 2.** ‘a spire’s fishhook’ may refer to the cross on top, or Walcott may be punning on the Christian symbol of the fish and ‘hooking’ worshippers or be alluding to Fishhook Spire, a peak near Mount Iowa (or all of these).

**Stanza 6.** ‘flambent Flemish nose’. This passage is reminiscent of Falstaff’s description of Bardolph’s nose:

Thou art our admiral, thou bearest the lantern in the poop, but ‘tis in the nose of thee; thou art the Knight of the Burning Lamp [...] [...] O, thou art a perpetual triumph, an everlasting bonfire-light! Thou hast saved me a thousand marks in links and torches, walking with thee in the night betwixt tavern and tavern; but the sack that thou hast drunk me would have bought me lights as good cheap at the dearest chandler’s in Europe. I have maintained that salamander of yours with fire any time this two and thirty years; God reward me for it! (Henry IV Part One, Act 3, Scene 3).

The whole section has a visual precision similar to Larkin's 'The Card Players'.<sup>1</sup> This is a parody of Dutch paintings of the subject such as the tavern scene in Jan Steen's *Prince's Day* or Jan Lievens' *Fighting Card Players and Death*.

**Stanza 10.** 'the clustered berries on the nose' are a symptom of rhinophyma and Walcott may have a particular portrait in mind as a model. Domenico Ghirlandaio's *An Old Man and A Young Boy* in the Louvre is one such.<sup>2</sup>

**Stanza 13.** The simile 'obese and turgid as his Empire' refers to a Dutch Empire at its peak in the hundred years before 1792 through the activities of the Dutch East India and West India companies, before the French Revolutionary Wars led to much of it being lost to Britain. The pejorative terms could apply equally to the British Empire 150 years later.

**Stanza 14.** Windmills are still a feature of the flat, windy landscapes of the Netherlands, with over 1000 remaining (9000 at their peak). Their functions included water pumping to drain land so they could be said to have built Holland.<sup>3</sup> 'ribbed' refers to their wooden construction which shows its skeleton.

**Stanza 16.** 'unlucky rooks' seems to reverse the normal folk-lore, where rooks living near a house are a sign of luck. Maybe the bad luck lies in the departure of the rooks.

**Stanza 20.** 'St Eustatius' was a Dutch colony in the Antilles. The island was a vital source of arms for the American colonies in their fight for independence. In 1776, the

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> *Domenico Ghirlandaio, 1449-1494: Atti del Convegno* (Firenze: Centro Di, 1994), p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> <<http://static.rnw.nl/migratie/www.radionetherlands.nl/thenetherlands/curiousorange/050117co-redirected>> [accessed 5 March 2011]

Dutch governor of the island returned the salute of the visiting American ship *Andrew Doria*, the first international recognition of the United States.

The island's activities led to the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War and it fell to Admiral Rodney in 1781, before being recaptured by the French a year later and returned to Holland in 1784. In all it changed hands more than 20 times.<sup>4</sup> Walcott's two grandfathers were Dutch and English.

'florin' refers to the Dutch coin (also called 'guilder'), not the English two-shilling coin of the same name. Ironically, given Walcott's themes, St Eustatius is one of the Netherlands Antilles islands that gave up the guilder in favour of the US dollar in January 2011.<sup>5</sup>

**Stanza 22.** '*The Marlborough*' was a third rate Ship of the Line with 74 guns. It was to suffer three killed in the Battle of the Saints.<sup>6</sup>

*Chapter XIV, Section ii.*

**Stanza 2.** Milk pouring and pewter are common motifs in Dutch interior painting.

**Stanza 8.** 'forked shadow' recalls Shakespeare's Lear, who says, 'unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art' (King Lear Act III Scene IV). The adjective is used a number of times in *Omeros* when referring to a person.

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<sup>4</sup> <<http://www.statiatourism.com/history.html>> [accessed 5 March 2011]

<sup>5</sup> <[http://www.worldlingo.com/ma/enwiki/en/Dutch\\_guilder](http://www.worldlingo.com/ma/enwiki/en/Dutch_guilder)> [accessed 21 Dec 2010]

<sup>6</sup> <[http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/SAC\\_SAR/SAINTS\\_BATTLE\\_OF\\_THE.html](http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/SAC_SAR/SAINTS_BATTLE_OF_THE.html)> [accessed 15 Dec 2010]

‘the Night Watch’ is capitalised, a strong hint from Walcott that it alludes to the Rembrandt painting of Captain Cocq’s company of Kloveniers (civic guards).<sup>7</sup>

**Stanzas 9-13.** The hare is associated with the moon in myths across the world, partly because dark areas on the full moon can be read as a hare. Walcott may have been prompted to his simile and metaphor by this.

**Stanza 12.** Alliteration on ‘h’ suggests breathlessness from fear.

*Chapter XIV, Section iii.*

**Stanza 1.** The ‘Redcoats’ are the British soldiers, from their uniform coats.

The ‘poinciana’ (various names including ‘Flamboyant’ in the Caribbean and ‘shack-shack tree’ in St Lucia) flowers in spectacular red for two months then drops its petals. The long seed pods (Walcott’s rattling bandoliers) give it its St Lucian name, a shack-shack being a rattle.<sup>8</sup> The tree has been transported around the world from Madagascar and its St Lucian name may derive from the Yoruba *seke-seke*. To that extent it mirrors the slave experience.

**Stanza 4.** An account from 1781 says:

The isle which forms the north side of the [Gros Îlet] Bay, is known by the name of Pigeon Island; it is very high and steep, and any appearance of flat is

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<sup>7</sup> Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt, his life, his paintings* (Harmondsworth and New York: Viking, Penguin, 1985), p. 211.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

on the windward side. The Navy have sick on this part, huts and tents being erected for the purpose.<sup>9</sup>

‘white noise’ is a pun: the surf is white and noisy, and it resembles the ‘white noise’ that is the background hiss on a radio, itself an echo of the Big Bang, creation, eternity, the sound that will never cease.

**Stanzas 9, 12 and 17.** These show that Achille’s ancestor Afolabe was a transported slave in the 1780’s (they still remembered their traditional worksongs) and that Achille’s name derives from Admiral Rodney renaming Afolabe. Walcott ironically suggests that Afolabe chose to accept the name.

McKinsey points out, in his article about the transmutation of names in *Omeros*, that Afolabe shifted his position from that held in XXV/iii/8-22, where he chided Achille for not knowing the meaning of his name. Now, he accepts a name he could not know the meaning of, because it is a matter of survival. He accepts the erasure of part of himself, in order to preserve the rest.<sup>10</sup>

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### ***Chapter XV.***

The Battle of the Saints takes place and Midshipman Plunkett is killed by his own sword.

### ***Chapter XV, Section i.***

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<sup>9</sup> John Rollo, *Observations on the Diseases which appeared in the Army on St Lucia*, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Michael McKinsey, *Missing Sounds and Mutable Meanings* (Callaloo, Vol 31 No. 3 Summer 2008) p. 894.

**Stanza 1.** The Battle of the Saints, a sea engagement connected with the American Revolutionary War, took place in 1782 off a group of small islands near Guadaloupe. A British fleet under Admiral Rodney defeated a French fleet under the Comte de Grasse. Following an initial clash, the main battle on 12 April saw the capture of five French ships and over 5000 French soldiers and sailors. The victory stopped the French and their Spanish allies capturing Jamaica.<sup>11</sup>

**Stanza 2.** The ‘break from the classic pattern’ was that instead of sailing parallel past the French fleet and exchanging broadsides with guns on one side of the ship only, Rodney’s flagship *Formidable* and several others took advantage of a shift of wind and French mistakes to break through the French line, firing from both sides at the French while partly protected from return fire. Several French ships were damaged and the French fleet was thrown into confusion. It is not clear whether the tactic, subsequently used by Nelson to even greater effect at Trafalgar, was deliberate and if so whether it was Rodney’s idea or that of a subordinate. Rodney was granted a peerage and has been since given the ultimate honour of having English pubs named after him (though not as many as Lord Nelson, of course).

**Stanza 5.** ‘the arc of ignition’ is the sweep of the gunner’s arm bringing the match to the touch-hole of the cannon.

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Harding, *The Evolution of the Sailing Navy 1509-1815* (New York: St Martins Press, 1995), p. 135 and <[http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/SAC\\_SAR/SAINTS\\_BATTLE\\_OF\\_THE.html](http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/SAC_SAR/SAINTS_BATTLE_OF_THE.html)> [accessed 20 Dec 2010]

**Stanza 6.** The similes for the ‘close-fire muskets’ are West Indian, ‘cicadas’ and a ‘beach-fire’. Earlier, in I/ii/12, the muskets were ‘cracking logs’. Walcott is finding new names from his islands for the old European things.

*Chapter XV, Section ii.*

**Stanza 3.** ‘embrochure’ seems to be a Walcott coinage, neither the *embrasure* or opening from which a cannon might emerge, nor the *embouchure* a wind player will make with their mouth.

**Stanza 4.** ‘the canvas’ is his sea-bag containing his personal things.

‘Observation is character’ repeats the homily from XIV/i/1.

**Stanzas 6-7.** The image of the mainmast as ‘a gommier’ with ‘its leaves like collapsing canvas’ refers directly back to I/i/21-22. The symmetry is reversed, this time a real mast is collapsing, with real canvas, a ship is breaking, not being born. The parallel is to the death of the old empires, while the islanders’ ship-building is creative and vigorous.

*Chapter XV, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 2-3.** Syllable counts vary from the normal twelve in three of the lines, perhaps to represent the chaos that sets Plunkett spinning.



**Stanza 3.** Plunkett's death is anti-heroic. He is killed not by the enemy in action but by the sea and his own carelessness with his sword. Major Plunkett does not know this, of course (see XIX/i/1).

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***Chapter XVI.***

Major Plunkett continues his research, Maud her sewing of her quilt of birds, symbolic of the many races who have come to the island.

***Chapter XVI, Section i.***

**Stanza 1.** 'fountained in blossoms' is a punning reference to Bloemfontein in Stanza 2.

'The Somme' was the major but inconclusive battle in World War 1, July-Nov 1916, where 1.5 million casualties were suffered by the British, French and German forces involved.

**Stanza 2.** Chlorine and phosgene (from 1915) and mustard gas (1918) were heavily used by both sides in World War 1, other gases less so.<sup>12</sup> Mustard gas, in particular, caused skin burns and the agonising stripping of the mucus membrane lining the bronchial tubes. The weapon was much feared, though causing less than 10% of

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<sup>12</sup> James E. Edmonds, *A Short History of World War I* (London, New York, Toronto: Geoffrey Cumberlege/Oxford University Press, 1951), pp. 89, 144 and 302.

fatalities among those affected. The effects on health were long-lasting, however.<sup>13</sup>

Wilfred Owen wrote of it in 'Dulce et Decorum Est', 1917:

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...  
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.  
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

The reference to Bloemfontein ties Major Plunkett's great-uncle to the British creation of concentration camps as part of Lord Kitchener's scorched earth tactics during the Second Anglo-Boer War. About 150,000 people, the women, children and old men from the Boer farms and their black workers and servants, were held in the camps and some 28,000, at least half of them black, died of neglect and disease. Compare this with Major Plunkett's own experience of recording what was found at Auschwitz (X/ii/23).

**Stanza 4.** The A to Z of military history Walcott chooses neatly includes England, France, the United States and the West Indies. At Agincourt, England defeated the French during the Hundred Years War in 1415. The Zouaves were soldiers from the French colony of Algeria whose title and loose-trousered uniform were copied in the

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<sup>13</sup> <<http://www.firstworldwar.com/weaponry/gas.htm>> [accessed 21 Dec 2010]

American Civil War by members of the 100 or so volunteer regiments on one side or the other. The Zouave dress was also adopted from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century by the West India Regiments under the British.

**Stanza 5.** ‘But why Scots ?’ Plunkett is rightly surprised. The surname is of Norman origin and entered Ireland from England with the invasion of Strongbow, Earl of Pembroke. Many Irish Plunketts subsequently emigrated to the New World at the time of the famines.<sup>14</sup>

*Chapter XVI, Section ii.*

**Stanza 2.** The ciphers were cast on the breech of the cannon to show who reigned at the time of manufacture. They stand for Georgius Rex III (reigned 1760-1820) and IV (reigned 1820-1830). Other such markings would have given Plunkett the weight and date of casting.

**Stanza 3.** James Bond published *Birds of the West Indies* in 1936. Ian Fleming, a keen ornithologist living in Jamaica, used his name for his fictional agent.<sup>15</sup>

**Stanzas 5-6.** An epic catalogue containing the names of birds, resembling that at I/ii/6-7 in its roll-call of nature rather than heroes and men.

**Stanza 6.** Lines 1 and 3 have an identical macaronic rhyme. See Appendix A for a catalogue and examples of the many rhyme types Walcott deploys. The range of his

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<sup>14</sup> <<http://houseofnames.com/xq/asp.fc/qx/plunkett-family-crest.htm> > [accessed 23 March 2010]

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth C. Parkes, ‘In Memoriam: James Bond’, *The Auk* Vol 106, No. 4 (Oct 1989), 718-20.

rhyming assists him in avoiding regularity, though he regarded the urge towards the return of a rhyme as essential in driving the poem onward across tercet boundaries (see Critical Introduction: Prosody).

**Stanza 7.** The birds on the tapestry represent the incoming races of the island. They arrive with their ankles ‘braceleted’ (read ‘coffled’) ‘with Greek or Latin tags’ (read ‘with classical names that are not their own’). They are a counterpoint to the major’s genealogical chart (XVI/i/1), which also has names in little pods. Both represent the genealogy of the island.

*Chapter XVI, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 1-2.** ‘his “I” a column/with no roof but a pediment’ The Empire that is part of Plunkett’s self-image is a façade, its roof gone. The façade is topped by the triangular pediment, echo of the Triangular Trade on which so much of the Empire’s wealth was built.

**Stanza 4.** The Battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, were the opening shots of the American Revolutionary War and the first episode in the breaking up of the British Empire. ‘cracking its echo to some hill-station of Sind’ restates the line from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Concord Hymn, written in 1836:

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,  
Their flag to April’s breeze unfurled,

Here once the embattled farmers stood,  
And fired the shot heard round the world

Sind was a province in British India, one of the later parts of the Empire to be lost in 1947. It is known for General Napier's brief punning telegram to his governor general after his victory over its Balochi tribesmen in 1843: *peccavi*. (meaning 'I have sinned').

**Stanza 6.** The final line contains two onomatopoeic rhythms: 'a gawky egret she stitched' contains an awkward rhythm, while 'in her sea-green silk' has the smoothness of the silk itself.

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### ***Chapter XVII.***

Plunkett pursues his research obsessively and discovers mention of Midshipman Plunkett's death.

### ***Chapter XVII, Section i.***

**Stanza 9.** 'inane' here means 'empty'.

**Stanzas 9-13.** Plunkett's lack of education (and his British clumsiness with languages) leads him to mispronounce and mis-spell *Iounalao* and later, in XVII/i/16, *villains*. 'Hewanorra' is the Carib name for St Lucia and *Iounalao* (Walcott's transliteration) or *Iouanalao* (the one found on most web-sites for St Lucia) is the

Aruak one. It is interesting that Walcott's transliteration does not contain all the syllables of *iguana* as *Iouanalao* does. He and Plunkett display similar characteristics, possibly deliberately.

The latter name is also claimed for St Barts in the Leeward Islands, but spelled *Ounalao*. The Aruaks may well have called several islands by that name, as separate groups reached them from the mainland. The islands are home to several species.<sup>16</sup>

***Chapter XVII, Section ii.***

**Stanza 2.** A 'mortar-seized fence' is what the British would call a wall built with mortar (i.e. not a dry-stone one) which might well be made of roughly shaped or unshaped stones.

**Stanza 4.** Plunkett's identification of Helen the housemaid with Helen the island is complete. He no longer distinguishes between the island for which soldiers fought and died and the girl in the purloined dress.

The idea of 'yellow fever' being caught from the dress includes several possible allusions: the basic one that North American Indians caught smallpox from infected blankets, then that yellow-fever is of African origin and was brought to the West Indies with the slaves, and that white men who lust for Asian women (as Plunkett lusts for the black Helen) are said (slang) 'to have yellow fever'.

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<sup>16</sup> Jan Rogoziński, *A Brief History of the Caribbean*, p. 356.

**Stanza 5.** The tree flowers ahead of the wet season, rather like the fall in North America whose progress southward can be followed with the colder weather.

The allusion to Redcoats is based mainly on the idea of ‘march’, as the flowers of the immortelle are orange rather than red.<sup>17</sup> The reference to ‘monsoon’ is generic (i.e. ‘rainy season’) rather than the particular weather system in India.

**Stanza 7.** ‘the lacy trough’ combines two of Walcott’s epithets for surf and the sea. The entry in the ledger shows Plunkett was buried at sea. Lilac is associated with death and Walcott may have been thinking of Whitman’s poem ‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d’, written in mourning for the death of Lincoln and for the dead of the Civil War.

***Chapter XVII, Section iii.***

**Stanza 4.** The final sentence is ambiguous. It refers equally to the cannon, made for George III or IV, and Midshipman Plunkett’s hand made for the ‘crown’. This crown may mean ‘meant for great things’ or it may be transferred from Major Plunkett himself, who as Regimental Sergeant Major would have worn a crown on his lower sleeve.

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***Chapter XVIII.***

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<sup>17</sup> <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/394906/mountain-immortelle>>  
[accessed 15 Dec 2010]

Plunkett realises his obsession with the history of the Battle of the Saints is an emotional one, due to the island's beauty, and Helen's. He finds Helen trying on Maud's bracelet and suppresses his lust for her. He traces history in the middens of centuries.

***Chapter XVIII, Section i.***

**Stanza 1.** Walcott draws another Troy/St Lucia parallel, showing that both battles were supposed to have been over a Helen.

**Stanza 4.** 'the sun's gold sovereign' combines the coin metaphor with allusions to the setting of the Sun King's empire (Louis XIV died some 70 years before the Battle of the Saints and his successors Louis XV and XVI brought the French monarchy into increasing unpopularity) and the rise of 'the Empire on which the sun never sets', a name once applied to the Spanish Empire that was now to be claimed by the British Empire. The coinage imagery continues into the following stanza with 'in Rodney's pocket' and 'the cost'.

**Stanza 6.** 'from arms and men' refers to the opening of Virgil's *Aeneid*, 'arma virumque cano', I sing of arms and the man...

**Stanzas 7-12.** Plunkett pursues his research with passion, seeking out any detail that will underpin his prejudged conclusion that Helen (the island) was the cause of the battle.



**Stanza 14.** The simile 'like a snake's head' reminds of the temptation in Eden.

*Chapter XVIII, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 1-9.** The trigger for Plunkett's obsession with giving Helen a history is revealed. The objective thoughts of XI/i/1-12 hide an unfulfilled lust for her beauty.

**Stanzas 1-5.** Plunkett's thoughts are Old Testament/Apocryphal. He is tempted by a Judith (who beheaded the would-be conqueror Holofernes), or he is an elder lusting after the innocent Susanna.

**Stanzas 6-9.** He is aware of the sexual history of white colonist and black servant. He cannot be guiltless, whichever stance he takes up. Everything she does, even making the laundry white, reminds him that she is black and a servant and he is the white imperialist.

*Chapter XVIII, Section iii.*

**Stanza 8.** The basins must be the curved ones used medically.

**Stanzas 11-12.** 'Gros Îlet' and 'parapet' form a macaronic eye rhyme (see Appendix A).

**Stanza 12.** ‘this was her parapet’ links Helen to Helen of Troy, watching the Greek and Trojan armies from the tower of the Skaian gates in *The Iliad*.<sup>18</sup>

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***Chapter XIX.***

Plunkett sees parallels between the Battle of the Saints and the fall of Troy. His experience of war and Midshipman Plunkett’s merge in his mind. He feels content that he has found a son for Helen the island and believes that great events would not happen here any more.

***Chapter XIX, Section i.***

**Stanza 1.** Henry Heggart Breen (born 1805) was an Irishman who entered the Colonial Service in 1832 and was successively Registrar, Colonial Secretary, Treasurer and Administrator of the Government of St Lucia, then from 1862 Provost Marshall of St Vincent, dying in office in 1881. His book stands as a definitive history of the island and the encomium is typical of its style.<sup>19</sup> An intriguing fact, given Walcott’s earlier mention of Bendemeer’s stream (see X/i/13) is that Breen’s mother, Maria Moore Eagerty, was a near relative of Thomas Moore, author of that poem.

Plunkett has now assumed Midshipman Plunkett as a son and Breen’s encomium has a personal meaning.

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Hammond, (translator) *Homer: The Iliad* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> Henry H. Breen, *St Lucia: Historical, Statistical and Descriptive*, pp. 72-3.

**Stanzas 2-3.** The splitting of a word on the rhyming syllable is not often met, but Walcott provides a reinforcing reason here. Rather than a feminine rhyme on ‘issue’ as a final word, the split comments on Plunkett’s excited diction. Such a split is used (for example) by Gerard Manley Hopkins in *The Windhover*, but is rare other than in light verse:

I CAUGHT this morning morning’s minion, king-  
dom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding  
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing...<sup>20</sup>

Walcott may have had another example in mind, given his admiring friendship for Robert Lowell, who wrote in ‘To Delmore Schwartz’:

The Charles  
River was turning silver. In the ebb-  
light of morning, we stuck  
the duck  
‘s web-  
foot, like a candle, in a quart of gin we’d killed.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Sourcebook* ed. by Alice Jenkins (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 136.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 158.

**Stanza 3.** The ‘coalesced powers’ were France and Spain, allies in the attempt to capture Britain’s interests in the Caribbean during the American Revolutionary War.

**Stanza 4.** The fleur-de-lys is the golden iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), known as yellow flag or lily, heraldic symbol of France. Walcott is alluding to the French Revolution, only 10 years after the Battle of the Saints, when aristocrats were guillotined and their heads fell into a basket.

**Stanzas 5-6.** Plunkett sees in *Ville de Paris* an echo of Paris, prince of Troy. Paris attracted the anger of Athena, and was rewarded with the love of Helen, for awarding the Apple of Discord for the fairest of the goddesses to Aphrodite, rather than Hera or Athena. Thus he caused the Trojan war and enlisted Athena on the side of the Greeks.

**Stanza 7.** ‘middy’ is the pull-over sailor top worn in the British Navy and since by others.

**Stanzas 7-13.** Plunkett sees the midshipmen as he does his comrades in North Africa, as sepia photos. His fantasy has become a memory, but a faded one.

**Stanza 11.** The Lee Enfield (not normally shortened to Enfield) was the British Army’s standard rifle during World War 2.

The tin basin was a necessary hygiene aid for a tank crew.

**Stanza 12.** ‘snaps its tassels’ refers to the ceremonial move of a bugler in which the cord from the bugle to his shoulder is snapped tight after or before blowing a call.

Mortimer and Glendower suggest Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*. Glendower led the Welsh revolt against Henry IV and Mortimer, married to Glendower’s daughter, took part. Introducing their names here alongside Plunkett’s comrades-in-arms Tumbly and Scott is puzzling, but may represent the soldiers of all the parts of the British Isles: Mortimer had Irish lands, Glendower Welsh ones, while Tumbly and Scott may represent England and Scotland.

**Stanza 13.** ‘finest hour’ recalls Churchill’s speech to the British Parliament (18 June 1940). The speech, which was made the day after the fall of France, ended ‘Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves, that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, ‘This was their finest hour.’”<sup>22</sup>

**Stanzas 15-16.** The statements about rhythm and passion and ‘some light that led them/beyond’ apply equally well to poetry as to drill.

*Chapter XIX, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 3-4.** ‘Rations/for the cannon’s mouth’ are *cannon-fodder*, the ordinary soldiers doomed to die.

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<sup>22</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume 2: Their Finest Hour* (London, Toronto, Melbourne, Sidney, Wellington: Cassell, 1949) pp. 198-9.

**Stanza 4.** ‘young Neds and Toms’ may allude to the Tom Swift series of adventure stories for boys, published in several series in America under the pseudonyms of Victor Appleton and Victor Appleton II from 1910 to the present day.<sup>23</sup> The dialogue in the later books made such use of punning verbs and adverbs that they became known as Tom Swifties (or Swiftlies), for example: ‘*Let’s go dig up some bodies*’, *Tom said gravely*. Tom has a friend called Ned Newton in the stories. However, the family’s ‘colored’ employee Eradicate is a cartoon figure and will not have appealed to Walcott. It is possible that Walcott came across these stories in his youth or when his son Peter was young. The use of Swifties was prevalent in the stories published in the 1960’s, when Walcott’s son Peter may have been a fan. Either way, Walcott clearly knew of them and they may have encouraged his propensity to pun (see Critical Introduction: Metaphor and Paronomasia).

**Stanzas 6-7.** Walcott makes a visual pun on the mace, in the form of the exclamation mark, then repeats it in the form of the poplars, underlining it with the punning rhyme on ‘marches’ and ‘marshes’.

*Chapter XIX, Section iii.*

**Stanza 1.** Hamner points out that the magnifying glass suggests Plunkett’s monomaniacal obsession.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> <[http://www.knowledgerush.com/kr/biography/178/Victor\\_Appleton/](http://www.knowledgerush.com/kr/biography/178/Victor_Appleton/)> [accessed 6 Jan 2010]

<sup>24</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, p. 65.

**Stanzas 2-6.** The sexual imagery ('penile cannon...embrochure...Able semen') underscores Plunkett's ambivalent motives. 'He had gone far enough' shows his realisation that this was betrayal.

The betrayal can be read two ways, as an unfulfilled lust for Helen or as a commitment to work that leads to him neglecting his wife (see Critical Introduction: Autobiography).

**Stanza 6.** 'moth...reversed' A moth hanging head up on a beam would form a 'W' with its wings, and Walcott alliterates on that letter in the subsequent line.

**Stanza 9.** The sound of the breakers is the name of the island 'Lucia'.

'He had given her a son' is ambiguous. It could mean that Plunkett feels he has found a son for Maud, but in XVII/iii/4 he resolved to keep the boy from her. It is more likely that he sees the midshipman as a son for Helen the island. Helen the maid is pregnant too, but her uncertainty about the father is between Achille and Hector. Plunkett's lust for her is unfulfilled (see XVIII/ii/3).

**Stanzas 9-11.** Eight lines here begin with the letter 'T'. Is this a deliberate reference to the Eighties ('eight T's')? If so, this may be because that is the decade in which the book is set, probably in 1987 if the election in Chapter XX is based on one of the two held in April of that year.

**Stanza 13.** 'A few make History. The rest are witnesses.' The origins of this

lie in Hitler's words in *Mein Kampf*:

World history is made by minorities when this minority of number embodies  
the majority of will and determination.<sup>25</sup>

Hamner sees Walcott 'guiding the reader into weighing the narrator's role as witness  
to experience against his simultaneous role as creator of experience.'<sup>26</sup>

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### *Chapter XX.*

The islanders take part in the elections for the Legislature. Maljo tries to break the  
two-party system, which he feels has failed the poor, by setting up his own party, the  
United Force. The party fails, after its Blockorama (fundraising fête)<sup>27</sup> was rained off  
and Maljo leaves the island.

### *Chapter XX, Section i.*

**Stanza 1.** 'flambeaux-bottles' are bottles half-filled with kerosene, with a cloth wick,  
used as an outdoor lamp and when catching crabs.<sup>28</sup>

**Stanzas 2-3.** St Lucia has been governed by only two parties since independence in  
1979. The St Lucia Labour Party (SLP) is a social democratic party, the United

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<sup>25</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, translated by Ralph Manheim (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 363.

<sup>26</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, p. 65.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

<sup>28</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*



Workers Party (UWP) led by Sir John Compton a conservative one. Compton was St Lucia's first prime minister in 1979 and again from 1982-1995 and from 2006-7.<sup>29</sup>

**Stanza 4.** Walcott rejects conventional politics as a solution to St Lucia's problems, here and in LVIII/i/5-13 where he condemns politicians. Elsewhere, he dismisses religion as divided and outdated (LIII/i/6-8 and XII/ii/1-7).

**Stanza 9.** 'compère' means close male friend, originally in a very significant kinship sense, a father/godfather relationship.<sup>30</sup>

**Stanza 12.** Maljo puns on 'hands' of bananas, a hand being one tier on the bunch or stem.

*Chapter XX, Section ii.*

**Stanza 3.** 'Lodge' suit, probably a Freemasons Lodge, present in St Lucia since 1779.<sup>31</sup> There is also a strong tradition of charitable organisations and Friendly Societies in St Lucia (Lions, Rotary, Kiwanis etc).<sup>32</sup>

General Douglas MacArthur famously promised Bataan 'I shall return' after being forced to evacuate during the Second World War.<sup>33</sup> His corncob pipe was iconic and he understood how to use the cult of personality.

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<sup>29</sup> Jan Rogoziński, *A Brief History of the Caribbean*, pp. 357-8.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

<sup>31</sup> Albert G. Mackey and H. L. Haywood, *Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry*, Volume 3 (Whitefish MT: Kessinger Publishing Rare Reprints, first publ. 1909) p. 1363.

<sup>32</sup> <<http://www.slucia.com/community.html>> [accessed 5 Jan 2010]

**Stanza 5.** ‘sections’ is the US surveying term when townships are laid out in regular blocks of a standard size. More loosely, it means district or neighbourhood.

**Stanzas 6-11.** Walcott expresses his fear that ‘progress’ is ruining the island and imposing another form of slavery. He had written earlier of local politicians who ‘are trapped in a world proposed by those who rule it, and these politicians see progress as inevitability. [...] We align ourselves to this bloc or that, to that way of life or the other.’<sup>34</sup> The whole speech is an example of West Indian code-mixing, in which English and French creoles are freely blended, and there is a lot of word-play (‘fried chicanery’, ‘neglection-election’). The speech is ‘broad talk’ (the language of the street) rather than the ‘sweet talk’ (oratorical Standard English) a politician might be expected to use and underlines Maljo’s man-of-the-people credentials.<sup>35</sup>

**Stanzas 10-11.** Walcott borrows the name ‘United Force’ from a Guyanese party. He fictionalises the St Lucian parties a little, using LP instead of SLP and WWPP instead of UWP. The last is another play on letters. He ‘doubles the U’ of UWP and then doubles the P. This is reminiscent of Pound’s doublings in ‘being sent to YY.HHignesses (AA. VV. = YY HH)’.<sup>36</sup>

**Stanzas 13-17.** A lyrical passage in which Walcott’s idealism shines through Philoctete.

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<sup>33</sup> William Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur 1880-1964* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), p. 271.

<sup>34</sup> Derek Walcott, ‘The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry’ (Miami: *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* Vol. 16. No. 1., University of Miami, 1974), reprinted in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, p. 52.

<sup>35</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies*, p. 57.

<sup>36</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, p. 211.

**Stanza 15.** ‘from Vieuxfort to Cap’, from the south to the north of the island.

**Stanza 17.** ‘leaves...leaflet’ advocates nature as the ideal, rather than politics.

*Chapter XX, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 2-3.** ‘until [...] violon en sac’. A St Lucian Creole proverb goes, ‘Bal fini, violon en sac’ meaning ‘the dance is over, the violin is in its bag’ ie. ‘all good things come to an end’. *Pawol en nou*, a web-site of Creole proverbs, reports it as ‘Bal fini, violon an sak. (Bal fini, violon dans sac.) La fête est finie.’<sup>37</sup>

**Stanza 9.** Migrant workers travel to Florida from the Caribbean and Latin America. Work in the orange growing areas is hard and dangerous from contact with pesticide residues. Conditions in some cases have been reported as near slavery, ironic as that sounds.

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*Chapter XXI.*

The Friday-night Jump-up takes place. Helen goes dancing, despite Achilles’s jealous opposition. Achilles reflects on the loss of the village’s simple life. Plunkett reflects on the decline of Empire. Achilles tells Helen to go to Hector.

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<sup>37</sup> <<http://antanlontan.perso.infinie.fr/proverbe.htm#b>> [accessed 25 Dec 2010]

*Chapter XXI, Section i.*

**Stanza 2.** ‘Cadence’ is a French Antillean dance music highly popular in St Lucia in the 1970s. Unlike the English language *calypso*, it is a French Creole-based form originating in Dominica and Guadeloupe and a development of Haitian Creole *compas* (or *konpas direk*). It was one of the forms that later were blended into the *zouk* (‘party’) form popular in the 1980s.<sup>38</sup> ‘Reggae’ is a Jamaican style that evolved in the late 1960’s and became popular world-wide. It has more of a political flavour than the St Lucian form of Cadence. ‘Country’ is also internationally popular, developing from a folk form in the rural South of the USA.

**Stanza 3.** ‘vamp’ is the repetitive phrases of the blockorama music.

**Stanzas 12-15.** Achille sulks, a parallel with the classical Achilles brooding in his tent and refusing to join the battle for Troy because his trophy, Briseis, has been given to Agamemnon. The parallel ends there, for Agamemnon returned the girl claiming they had never shared a bed, while Hector and Helen will certainly sleep together.

**Stanza 13.** ‘locked it’ means ‘turned it off’.

**Stanzas 15-23.** Achille embodies Walcott’s fears for the island. He can see, literally, as Seven Seas cannot, the way tourism and development are corrupting the island way of life. Tourism in the islands is sold as hedonism.<sup>39</sup> Real though the dangers are,

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<sup>38</sup> Gregory Rabess, ‘Cadence: The Dominican Experience’, in Jocelyne Guilbault (author and editor), *Zouk: World Music in the West Indies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 90-105

<sup>39</sup> Jan Rogoziński, *A Brief History of the Caribbean*, p. 352.

there is also a little of Walcott's Methodist upbringing in his mourning the loss of the simple life to sin and drugs.

**Stanza 23.** 'longtime' means 'out-dated'.<sup>40</sup>

**Stanzas 23-24.** Achille foresees Hector's fate in a sign from the sky, a common epic device.

*Chapter XXI, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 1-5.** 'Dominus illuminatio mea' '*The Lord is my light*' could either refer to Psalm 27, of which these are the opening words, or the motto of the Oxford University Press, taken from the Psalm. It becomes clear that it is the motto on the crest of OUP that is meant. Plunkett is reading a book from his schooldays that reminds him of how the Empire was.

**Stanzas 1-2.** The progressive loss of Empire is exemplified by Egypt's independence in 1922, India's in 1947 and the humiliation of Britain following its invasion of Egypt in 1956, supposedly to protect its interests in the Suez Canal.

The raven is widely considered a bird of ill-omen and of wisdom. Either or both may apply here, depending on viewpoint.

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

**Stanza 2.** ‘Gurkhas’ from Nepal, ‘Anzacs’ from Australia and New Zealand and ‘Mounties’ from Canada represent the soldiers of Empire.

**Stanza 9.** The ‘contending music’ sets the ordinary St Lucians’ jump-up, African in its thudding drum-beat, against the Western disco in the hotel.

**Stanza 10.** The traditional reading of the stars in Africa has been lost along with the old languages, after the Middle Passage.

**Stanzas 11-14.** Achille cannot name the stars he uses to navigate. His view of them contains no imposed constellations, no metaphors. He sees them as Walcott wishes to see the island, as they are.

*Chapter XXI, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 3-6.** ‘on the ebony face, and the shadow she made’ The four stress anapaestic line draws attention to the symbolism of the shadow. Helen is ‘ebony’, it is her shadow depersonalised as ‘it’ that Achille sees doing its nightly toilette. He does not see her. ‘Whoever she was’, her beauty is not her.

**Stanza 10.** ‘More men plough that body than canoe plough the sea’ could be Walcott reworking Marlowe’s ‘Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?’<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (London: Dent (Everyman’s Library), 1909), p. 154.

**Stanza 12.** ‘fig-trees’ may be bananas, as ‘fig’ or ‘figue’ is the common term for them in the West Indies, distinguishing them from ‘banane’ which is the plantain.<sup>42</sup>

The three caesurae in the final line make the language exemplify Helen’s child-like simplicity.

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***Chapter XXII.***

Helen moves in with Hector and Achille loses faith in himself. Hector drives himself and his transport furiously, fearing that she still loves Achille. Time passes.

Independence is achieved, but self-government makes no difference to the fishermen, only to Plunkett.

***Chapter XXII, Section i.***

**Stanza 3.** When Achille loses his confidence, it is his hands that represent his self. He identifies with his skills as a fisherman.

***Chapter XXII, Section ii.***

**Stanza 1.** ‘The Comet’ is a resonant name for Hector’s van. Icarus-like, at their perihelion comets approach the sun and Hector will share Icarus’ fate. The idea of comets was fresh at the time Walcott was writing because Halley’s comet had made its latest return to the inner solar system in 1986.

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*.

**Stanzas 3-5.** The Comet embodies a dilemma for St Lucia and the Caribbean:

whether to revert to the African past and risk missing out on what the modern world can offer or to abandon themselves to the modern, risk it going too far and lose control of their destiny. Walcott would advocate a middle way, of course.

**Stanza 8.** The old woman does not know a tiger from a leopard, showing how far she has come from her African roots.

**Stanzas 8-9.** Hector demonstrates an ambivalent attitude to religion, backing both African animism in the fur monkey and Christian symbolism to keep him safe. When he starts to move, the Virgin is almost upset and his passengers clutch at the African leopard skins.

*Chapter XXII, Section iii.*

**Stanza 2.** The transferred epithet 'slanted' reminds of Emily Dickinson's 'certain Slant of light' (see also note to X/iii/1-4). Her poem, about winter light, is equally appropriate to the death of Empire.

"Tis the seal, despair,-  
An imperial affliction  
Sent us of the air.



**Stanza 3.** ‘The Sphere, The Tatler, The Illustrated London News’ were all illustrated magazines. Only The Tatler is still in publication.

**Stanzas 6-8.** Sunsets, especially over the ocean and in clear conditions, sometimes show a green flash as the last part of the sun dips below the horizon. Walcott uses it as a metaphor for the setting of Empire, which disappears unnoticed because all of its trappings remain. Walcott is cynical about the new freedom being used well.

**Stanzas 8-10.** Independence makes no difference to the islanders.

*Chapter XXIII.*

Helen visits her old employer Maud to ask for a loan, but leaves before Maud can give it.

*Chapter XXIII, Section i.*

**Stanza 1.** A ‘crocus-bag’ is a jute bag about 2 feet across and 4 feet deep, used to hold rice or sugar. The description of the port matches Castries, capital of St Lucia and Walcott’s home town.

**Stanza 3.** The church (strictly speaking the Cathedral Basilica of the Immaculate Conception) stands on what has now been renamed Derek Walcott Square. Given the problems Walcott and his family had with the church (see note to IV/i/10-11), this must be a source of satisfaction to him.

**Stanzas 4-7.** The Angelus is a devotional bell, rung at noon (and at 6 am and 6 pm) as a call to prayer in celebration of the Incarnation. Walcott's disapproval of the Catholic Church and its grip on St Lucia comes across in the word 'paralyzed' and in his comparison of the Angelus to ash from the disastrous eruptions of Vesuvius at Pompeii in 79 AD and Mount Pelée at St Pierre on Martinique in 1902, fixing the community in stasis.

The image 'halos of sound' catches the sanctity of the message (the apostles' haloes) and the widening reverberations, literally 'ringing' out.

**Stanza 8.** The volcano Mount Pelée annihilated Saint-Pierre in two minutes in 1902. Louis-Auguste Sylbaris or Cyparis, the 'only survivor' (not quite true, there were two others), spent time on show at Barnum and Bailey's Circus. He was in jail for assault and survived though burned until found four days later.<sup>43</sup>

*Chapter XXIII, Section ii.*

**Stanza 3.** Maud in her ignorance makes a prescient guess about the canoe. No normal canoe would be attempting such a trip, but we are to discover that this is Achille's canoe, and he is to make a dream-voyage to Africa.

**Stanza 6.** The idea of smoke as 'time burning' comes from the burning of leaves at autumn and from the town midden on the beach being on fire.

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<sup>43</sup> Alwyn Scarth, *La Catastrophe: Mount Pelée and the Destruction of Saint-Pierre, Martinique* (Harpenden: Terra, 2002), pp. 1 and 183-9.

**Stanza 7.** The pace is slowed to the idea of drought and inaction by the double caesura and the adjacent pairs of stressed syllables.

*Chapter XXIII, Section iii.*

**Stanza 1.** Vigie is the promontory forming the northern side of the port of Castries. This places the Plunkett farm above the port, perhaps on Morne Fortune, south of the port, where the old Combermere barracks are. XIX/ii/1 sites the Plunkett house in an old barracks.<sup>44</sup>

When Achille walks six miles to the farm from Gros Îlet (IX/i/2) this fits roughly with the Morne, as does the Plunketts' drive up the Morne to a view of Cul-de-Sac valley, the next valley south of Castries (X/ii/10).

The Plunketts are therefore nearer to the centre of things than the villagers of Gros Îlet, but do not participate in the ex-patriate society of the capital (the 'Victoria' club), preferring the idyllic rural scenes. Their vision of the island is as false as that of the ex-patriates and bears similarities to Walcott's own (guilty) liking for scenic poverty (XLV/ii/18 and LVIII/iii/10-11).

**Stanza 7.** 'touch of the widow there' Again Maud shows herself to be prescient, anticipating Hector's death.

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<sup>44</sup> St Lucia map (1:25000) *Series E803 (D.O.S. 345) Sheet 1 – St Lucia, edition 5-D.O.S.1981* (Lands and Survey Department, Castries, St Lucia)

**Stanzas 7-8.** Walcott makes a rare mistake. Morning glory and allamanda would not be confused, especially by Maud, whose business and pleasure are growing flowers. Though both may bloom yellow, they are very distinct species.

**Stanza 9.** ‘blooming garden’ puns, ‘blooming’ being both a mild intensifier and a floral adjective.

**Stanza 10.** By dropping into patois, Maud makes a rhythmic, punning and rhyming reference to Keats’ *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. ‘Miss Helen’ is La Belle Dame and ‘non merci’ a rhyming match for ‘Sans Merci’. Maud is saying through Keats that Helen no longer ‘hath me in thrall’, but there are further possible layers to her pun. ‘Belle-dame’ is French for the Painted Lady butterfly<sup>45</sup> (see V/iii/6 and 17 for Helen previously being seen by Plunkett as a butterfly) and another meaning for painted lady is ‘tart’. ‘Belle-dame’ also means belladonna, the deadly nightshade with its poisonous black berries.

**Stanza 17.** Helen uses vernacular pronunciation of ‘there’. Walcott generally avoids ‘*de*’ and ‘*dem*’ in the islanders’ speech in this poem. Here, it allows him to give voice to the mutual resentment between Helen and Maud.

He puns on ‘I dere’, meaning ‘I’m OK’ in vernacular, but read by Maud as Helen finally admitting that she is being daring (i.e. has the nerve, the impudence) to come to ask for help. Burnett points out that this exchange can be read as recursive, with

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<sup>45</sup> <<http://wordreference.com/fren/belle-dame>> [accessed 4 April 2010]

Helen meaning to say she has the nerve, that if Maud wants confrontation, fine.

Burnett sees the whole transaction as symbolic of the end of empire.<sup>46</sup>

### *Chapter XXIV.*

Achille sets out to fish and encounters the sea-swift, symbol of the joining of Africa and the Caribbean. He thinks of fellow fishermen who had drowned and goes on to remember the dead slaves thrown overboard on the Middle Passage. He sees the ghost of his father and for the first time asks himself who he is. He hallucinates that the swift is towing his boat out into the Atlantic, across to Africa.

### *Chapter XXIV, Section i.*

**Stanzas 3 and 7.** The choriambic openings to the lines ‘widening the joy’ and ‘This was his garden’ fit with Achille’s sense of his spirit opening.

**Stanza 4.** The reappearance of the swift raises hopes for Helen returning to Achille and he recovers the skills in his hands on which he depends (see XXII/i/3).

**Stanzas 6-7.** The phrases ‘He was at home.//This was his garden.’ contain the essence of Achille. Not just that he felt at home here and could gather his crop, but that here was where he belonged in the scheme of things, somehow more complete here than anywhere else, and that here he lived a kind of innocence that was Edenic.

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<sup>46</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 150.

**Stanza 11.** The three choriambes again express the happiness in line 3: ‘hooked to his heart’, ‘arrowing aim’, ‘blessing enough’.

**Stanza 13.** ‘the god’s body torn from its hill’ is the *gommier* from which the canoe was made.

*Chapter XXIV, Section ii.*

**Stanza 1.** ‘the unmarked fathoms’ are the areas on sea charts where the sounding lines could not find bottom and the depth in fathoms is not shown.

**Stanza 4.** The three successive stresses on ‘whole world/globed’ emphasise the entirety of his vision.

**Stanzas 7-11.** This section is an example of Walcott’s use of parenthesis, interrupting the action to follow another thread of narrative, a skill he admired in Dante (see note to XLV/i/3 and 17).

Walcott borrows names for his drowned fishermen. ‘Habal’ is mentioned in his play ‘*The Sea at Dauphin*’ as brave to fight the sea, ‘Winston James’ may well be based on the writer on Caribbean and colonial history (if so, Walcott has a joke at his expense), ‘Herald Chastenet’ is a local surname or place name (Minvielle and Chastenet was a famous store in Castries and there is a district and a resort Anse Chastenet south of Castries).

**Stanzas 13-21.** These 27 lines have a rhyme containing a liquid 'L' sound. The key to this is in Stanza 14, 'No action but stasis', the word 'stasis' repeated in Stanza 20 with the implication that nothing has happened meanwhile. With the boat lying with oars idle, the only sound would have been the slop of the water against the hull.

**Stanza 20.** 'Achille/in the stasis of his sunstroke' is about to have a dream in which he discovers truths about himself. This plot device was used earlier in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, where Makak comes to consciousness about himself.<sup>47</sup>

**Stanzas 25-9.** The Narrator/Walcott intervenes in his own description of Achille to comment in terms that Achille could not have used.

**Stanza 26.** 'love-vine' is a parasitic vine that overgrows its host then taps its sap, eventually smothering it.<sup>48</sup>

**Stanza 27.** 'tamer of horses' is an epithet of the god of the sea, Poseidon, in the Homeric Hymns, anonymous hymns to the gods in dactylic hexameter, attributed to Homer but written over several centuries from the seventh century BC.<sup>49</sup> Homer himself uses the epithet for Hector at the end of the *Iliad*, claiming for him a skill that was highly prized among the Greeks.

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<sup>47</sup> Derek Walcott, *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1971).

<sup>48</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*.

<sup>49</sup> Apostolos N. Athanassakis (translator), *The Homeric Hymns: Translation, Introduction, and Notes* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 64.

Walcott applies it to Achille, acknowledging his mastery of the waves, the ‘white horses’ of English tradition, and in doing so equates him with the Caribbean Hector. Both of them share St Lucia’s ‘only inheritance’, the sea.

**Stanza 29.** ‘the triangular trade’ of the 17<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, was when trade goods manufactured in Europe were carried to Africa, slaves from Africa were carried to the Caribbean and the Americas and sugar, cotton and tobacco from the Caribbean were carried to Europe. The same ships were not used throughout. There was similar but less traffic between New England, Africa and the Caribbean, with Caribbean molasses being distilled in New England into rum for trading for slaves in Africa.

Triangular images recur in the poem, as with the references to pediments (XVI/iii/2 and XXXVI/i/2) and the windsurfers’ sails (XXVIII/i/8).

Walcott places the word ‘ghost’ at the end of the line, suiting the sense of the following phrase.

**Stanza 30.** Achille asks himself the epic question. Answering this is key to being able to live with the history of the triangular trade.

***Chapter XXIV, Section iii.***

**Stanzas 1-9.** A lyrical hymn to the sea-swift. Achille feels transported.



In Walcott's plan for the story, Achille does not yet have the right answer to his question. He feels he is headed home, to Africa, and must work his way through that experience before he will realise that home is the island where he was born.

***Book 3.***

Achille visits Africa in a dream, calling up what may be race memories, or fragments of folk tales or movie scenes. While there, he is chided by his ancestor Afolabe for forgetting the meaning of African names. Achille cannot be happy in Africa because he remembers future slavery and misses his island home. Natives are captured by black slavers and gradually forget all they knew.

Helen longs for Achille. When Achille returns, he remembers the black Buffalo soldiers killing Red Indians, just as the conquistadors had killed the Aruak people. He finds an Aruak relic while tidying Seven Seas' yard. Seven Seas tells him about history, that oppression is all one story.

Book 3 ends with Walcott/the Narrator visiting his elderly mother, who cannot remember who he is at first. He has a brief vision of Africa, then leaves to continue his self-exile in the States.

***Chapter XXV.***

Achille paddles up-river to his ancestral village where he meets his African ancestor. Afolabe quizzes him about his name and tells him names must mean something. He accuses him of having forgotten his roots.

***Chapter XXV, Section i.***

**Stanzas 1-13.** The syllable counts become very irregular here and remain so until the start of Chapter XXIX, where the story returns to St Lucia. The whole of the African sequence is marked by lines that vary frequently from 12 syllables. This could be to mark the dream state Achille is in or to symbolise the free state of the Africans before the Middle Passage and their encounter with the iron bonds of ‘civilisation’.

**Stanza 8.** The final sentence could be a reference to Naipaul’s 1979 novel, *A Bend in the River*. This possibility is strengthened by Section iii Stanza 11, where Afolabe speaks of a meaningless name, ‘then you would be nothing./did they think you were nothing in that other kingdom?’ This sounds very like Naipaul’s, ‘The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.’<sup>1</sup>

**Stanza 9.** ‘his own beginning and his end’ echoes Eliot’s ‘In my beginning is my end.’<sup>2</sup>

**Stanzas 9-10.** At last the ‘strange, inimical river’ becomes familiar as Achille arrives at the village. Memory wakes.

**Stanzas 11-13.** God speaks to Achille in Creole, logically enough as He is in Achille’s head. He says, ‘thou shalt have no God’, part of the First Commandment from Exodus 20:3 (‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me’), but does not complete the phrase, instead adding ‘should in case you forgot/my commandments’. ‘should in

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<sup>1</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1979), p.9.

<sup>2</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (East Coker) in *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 177

case' seems to be an example of Creole doubling for emphasis, as in XXII/i/6, or with 'true-true' in LXIII/i/13.

Achille is torn between his faith in God and his African gods. He cannot remember the name of the river-god and the tree-god.

Implied in the Biblical quotation are the words that precede it in Exodus 20:2; 'I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.' This could be taken as ironic, given that Christian slavers and slave-owners formed two of the links in the slaves' chain of bondage. However, it could also be read for the way in which black churches sustained the spirit of the slaves.

### ***Chapter XXV, Section ii.***

**Stanza 4.** Walcott has an inclusive geography of West Africa in the poem. The river Achille returns to here is a 'branch of the Congo', the ancestor he is about to meet (XXV/iii/6) has a Yoruba name, in XXVIII/i/3 he hears the village griot sing of his 'ancestors/from the Bight of Benin, from the margin of Guinea'. These are representative places and names and could not be brought together into one actual spot on the map. Taken together, they represent three thousand miles of coastline, all of which were raided by the slavers.

**Stanza 5.** The reference to sow and suckling piglet recalls the Aeneid Book 8, where the white sow and her thirty piglets on the banks of the Tiber are the sign that Aeneas

has reached his future home. Here, as often in *Omeros*, the symbolism is reversed and it is Achille's past home that has been reached.

**Stanza 6.** The alliteration on 'h' involving hands repeats the image at II/i/9.

**Stanza 7.** Walcott splits his ancestry and states his position, that neither strain is dominant and both can be accepted.

**Stanza 10.** Achille's recognition of his father echoes Telemachus recognising Odysseus in the Odyssey Book 16, though Walcott reverses the roles, with Achille being the wanderer returned.

*Chapter XXV, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 1-3.** Achille and his father are water. Afolabe's hair is surf (St Lucia) and his forehead a river (Africa). Their love is an estuary and their languages the river's foam and chuckles. 'Time stood between them' and the water imagery may derive from the Styx that separated the dead from the living or may symbolise that they are both fishermen (see Stanza 6).

**Stanza 6.** 'Afolabe' is a Yoruba name meaning 'Born into wealth'.<sup>3</sup>

**Stanzas 8-20.** Afolabe and Achille discuss the business of naming and the affliction of forgetting. Naming is to attribute meaning to life, essential to realising one's

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<sup>3</sup> <<http://www.behindthename.com/name/afolabi>> [accessed 17 Jan 2010]

identity. Forgetting is to deny one's inheritance, one's ancestry. Afolabe chides Achille for not knowing what his name means, for forgetting where he has come from. Walcott has said, 'What this poem is doing, in part, is trying to hear the names of things and people in their own context, meaning everything named in a noun, and everything around a name...It's the origin of the real Caribbean nouns that I'm after.'<sup>4</sup>

**Stanza 15.** 'It was prediction, and memory' conveys how Time has lost its meaning for Achille. He is in the past, but his foreknowledge is memory of what will have happened in his past when he is back in the present. The phrase is repeated at XXVII/i/1.

**Stanza 21.** 'The white foam' refers back to Stanza 1, where Afolabe's hair is 'surf/curling round a sea-rock'.

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### ***Chapter XXVI.***

Achille learns the history and lore of his tribe, and visits the sacred grove. He cannot forget the future and imagines himself back in the Caribbean. At the tribal village, he sees ceremonies that are the same as those still carried out at Christmas in St Lucia.

### ***Chapter XXVI, Section i.***

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<sup>4</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J.P.White, *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 173.

**Stanza 2.** The 'kola nut' (*cola nitida*) is a moderately addictive source of caffeine and other stimulants and was widely traded in Africa.<sup>5</sup> It was used ritually, for example during the taking of an oath<sup>6</sup> and served as currency for tax or tribute or as part of a bride price. Interesting for this poem that in the form of Coca Cola (1886) and Pepsi-Cola (1893), kola made the transition from the old ways to the new.<sup>7</sup> Though no longer using the nut as a natural ingredient the ubiquity of the drinks have brought the name to stand for American commercial colonisation.

**Stanza 3.** 'white-eyed storyteller' This is another blind poet, to add to Homer and Seven Seas and, until the revelatory moment in LIX/i/1, Walcott himself.

'balaphon' (or balophon) is a wooden xylophone-like instrument found throughout West and East Africa. Properly the 'bala' ('balafo' is to play the bala), it is normal for three instruments to play together, two providing the accompaniment to the third, which is the lead and plays solos.<sup>8</sup> The description of the sound as 'whine' refers to the reverberation from the gourds used as sounding boxes and the persistence of certain repeated notes in the tunes.<sup>9</sup>

**Stanzas 4-5.** The last part of the tribal lore seems to refer to Achille, miles off course, forgetting everything that is his inheritance.

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<sup>5</sup> J. F. A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder (editors), *History of West Africa Vol 1* (London: Longman, 1971), pp. 363-4.

<sup>6</sup> William Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> Jordan Goodman, Paul E. Lovejoy and Andrew Sherratt (editors), *Consuming Habits: Drugs in History and Anthropology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 103-119.

<sup>8</sup> Ingrid Monson (editor), *The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective* (New York, London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 188 and 199-203.

<sup>9</sup> <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7i\\_W5jtIR8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7i_W5jtIR8)> [accessed 17 Dec 2010]

**Stanza 8.** ‘the hut he had been given/for himself and any woman he chose as his companion’. Walcott alludes to Books 1 and 9 of *The Iliad*, where Agamemnon threatens to take the slave-girl Briseïs from Achilles’ hut and Nestor speaks of him doing so, thereby dishonouring Achilles.<sup>10</sup>

**Stanza 9.** The sacred grove is a feature of religious observance world-wide. It was once to be found outside all Yoruba settlements. The Osun Osogbo sacred grove in Nigeria, now seen as a symbol of identity for all Yoruba people, is a UNESCO world heritage site and may be the last of the Yoruba groves.<sup>11</sup> Other such groves are still to be found in Ghana.

There is a parallel with Ancient Greece, where such groves were used for religious and Academic purposes.

**Stanzas 9-10.** Achille is unable to invoke the gods. He has lost all connection with his past and sees the symbolic hole where a tree has been uprooted. The line lengths build up from 12 to 13, 14 then 16 syllables, almost the extreme of the range Walcott allows himself, to mark Achille’s sense of dislocation.

***Chapter XXVI, Section ii.***

**Stanzas 1-12.** This section is doubling after doubling: the reflections in the river (Stanzas 2-3), the history ahead and the future reversing (Stanzas 3 and 7), the drowned man and the living man on the pier (Stanza 4) (who is only a dream person

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Hammond (translator) Homer’s *Iliad*, pp. 7 and 135.

<sup>11</sup> <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1118>> [accessed 18 Jan 2010]



anyway), the waveless river and the surf (Stanza 9), the fishermen in the river and Philoctete in the sea (Stanzas 9 and 12). Achille is torn in two by his memories.

**Stanza 12.** The line lengths build up 10,11,12 syllables, a return to normal, taking Achille from bitter drink, to sea, to coming home to his friend.

*Chapter XXVI, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 4-5.** ‘the huge cemeteries/of bone’ (see also XXVIII/i/6) refers to the high mortality rate among slaves on the Middle Passage voyage to the Caribbean. The reasons for such death rates were the severe over-crowding and the time spent on board. The voyage itself took over two months and some slaves would have been below decks for weeks or months before that while the ship sailed the Guinea coast buying slaves. A contemporary survey reported the *Gold* (or *Gould*) *Frigate* as follows:

Length for stowage of Negroes	63 foot
Breadth between decks	23 foot 10 inches
Height between decks	4 foot 5 inches

which last mentioned spoils all, for she is far too low to carry 2 tier of negroes without stifling, & if but one she will take in but 400 negroes.

In other words, each slave would have less than 4 square feet of deck and a headroom just high enough to sit in. The ship owner protested that he could carry 800 in 2 tiers, but was firmly told:

Tis morally impossible that 2 tier of Negroes can be stowed between decks in 4 foot 5 inches. Were she four or five inches more, they would venture.

They would contemplate reducing the headroom to about 2 foot 6 inches !! As it was, the same account records that *The Daniel and Henry* lost 206 slaves out of 452.

In Jamaica alone, almost 700,000 slaves were landed between 1655 and 1787. At the above death rate, over half a million dead would have been thrown overboard on voyages to that one destination alone.<sup>12</sup> Estimates of the total numbers on the Middle Passage vary widely (Naipaul says twenty million crossed<sup>13</sup> and academic studies have suggested over nine million<sup>14</sup>) but taking even the minimum figure suggests another eight million could have been thrown overboard.<sup>15</sup> On his 1800-mile walk from Africa, Achilles could have stepped from skull to skull like stepping stones.

**Stanza 10.** ‘fingers of light’ in the morning are reminiscent of *The Iliad*’s ‘Dawn [...]with her rosy fingers’ (Book 1).<sup>16</sup>

**Stanza 15.** ‘chac-chac and ra-ra’ are both rattles made from seeds in gourds, similar to the Spanish *maracas*. The rhymes on this stanza are identical, for sense reasons.

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<sup>12</sup> Nigel Tattersfield, *The Forgotten Trade*, pp. 18 and 177.

<sup>13</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, (London: Picador, 1996), p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> Jan Rogoziński, *A Brief History of the Caribbean*, p. 128.

<sup>15</sup> Jan Rogoziński, *A Brief History of the Caribbean* (New York: Facts On File, 1999), p. 130.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Hammond (translator) Homer’s *Iliad*, p. 15.

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*Chapter XXVII.*

Black slavers raid the village and Achille is powerless. He follows them and kills one man but his attempt to save the captives fails.

*Chapter XXVII, Section i.*

**Stanzas 1-2.** Achille hears the fishermen felling trees in a parallel to the canoe-making from Chapter 1, both ‘prediction and memory’, prolepsis and analepsis in the same moment, so thoroughly are the strands of time tangled at this point. Walcott adds crossing X’s, to underline the confusion and highlights the line by giving it seventeen syllables instead of the usual twelve or thirteen.

**Stanzas 3-9.** Walcott describes a slave raid on Achille’s ancestral village. The raiders are ‘archers’, in other words, black Africans, like the people they are capturing. He is making a point that is important for him. He said:

...the whole idea of slavery was that you caught people and sold them to the white man. Black people capturing black people and selling them to the white man. That is the real beginning; that is what should be taught. So what do you say? Do you say slavery is wrong regardless of its colo[u]r? The people

who sold African and West Indians as slaves were Africans. That's a reality  
that is not often told.<sup>17</sup>

Hamner glosses this, saying 'The object is not to assign guilt or innocence, but to encourage responsible growth.'<sup>18</sup> Walcott dismissed the fanciful 'noble savage' as easy nostalgia and said, 'Once we have lost our wish to be white, we develop a longing to become black, and those two may be different, but are still careers.'<sup>19</sup>

### ***Chapter XXVII, Section ii.***

**Stanza 9.** The blending of the generations here is comparable to similar statements in XII/i/9 ("which is the boy's,/which the father's?" "Sir" – I swallowed – "they are one voice."'), XXV/ii/10 ('it/was himself in his father') and XXXII/i/8 ('I was both father and son.').

**Stanzas 10-11.** The section ends with the interlocking of a standard and a reverse *terza rima*, with the rhyme pattern aba/bab. Walcott uses this device fairly often to conclude a section (see IX/iii, X/ii, XIII/iii) but this is the closest yet to full rhyme. He will use it again in XXIX/i, XLI/i, XLVI/iii etc. It is rather like the tying-off of the section, just as another end-section device, the rhyming couplet, is like a final underlining.

### ***Chapter XXVII, Section iii.***

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<sup>17</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Robert Brown and Cheryl Johnson, 'Thinking Poetry: An Interview with Derek Walcott' (*Cream City Review*, Vol 14, No. 2, Winter 1990), reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p.179.

<sup>18</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, p. 18.

**Stanza 1.** A griot is a West African poet and praise-singer, a story teller who preserves the stories and history of the race as did the bards of old Europe. The history is a living thing as the griot will create new songs on contemporary matters and can be witty or satirical. The griot is still a vital part of society in West Africa. Cosentino wrote in 1981:

Political candidates in Senegal must still ensure their reputations with the minstrel class of griots if they wish their reputations to count at the polls.<sup>20</sup>

**Stanza 11.** ‘like a spear-gaffed fish’ recalls Patroclus killing Thestor in *The Iliad* Book 16, where he hauls Thestor from his chariot with a spear through his jaw, ‘as when a man sitting on a rocky point hauls a monster fish out of the sea with his line and bright bronze hook’.<sup>21</sup>

**Stanzas 15-16.** Achille hopes to change the future, make the river (i.e. of Time) flow backward, but is prevented from doing so by a symbolic chain. Slavery means you cannot go back.

**Stanza 16.** Achille’s dream incorporates the piercing of his heel that occurred in I/ii/2.

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### ***Chapter XXVIII.***

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<sup>20</sup> Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (editors), *Cowries and Kobos: The West African Oral Tale and the Short Story* (Mundelstrup, Denmark: Dangaroo Press, 1981), p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Hammond (translator), *Homer’s Iliad*, p. 263.

The griot sings of the sadness of the uprooted tribe, and Walcott records their survival, the scattering of the tribes of Africa. They forget their skills and callings, their names, and find themselves tied into a new nation by the pain they share. They mourn the little things and lose their ancestral languages.

***Chapter XXVIII, Section i.***

**Stanzas 3 and 7.** ‘from the Bight of Benin, from the margin of Guinea’ Walcott uses the almost-repeated line, marked out by its rhythm of four anapaests, to parenthesise the slaves’ dying on board.

**Stanza 6.** See note to XXVI/iii/4-5 re corpses thrown overboard.

**Stanza 11.** The tribes of Ghana (Ashanti), the upper Niger (Mandingo), southern Nigeria (Ibo) and the Guinea (Susa and Fulani near the coast, Mandingo in the interior) were all scattered.

‘each man was a nation/in himself’ has, behind its obvious meaning of ‘alone’, Shabine’s statement in *The Schooner Flight*, ‘I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.’<sup>22</sup> This makes the *Omeros* phrase a much more positive statement than it would otherwise seem. Each man bears in himself the potential of becoming a nation.

***Chapter XXVIII, Section ii.***

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<sup>22</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, p. 4.

**Stanza 1.** ‘Men are born makers’. Walcott puns, for a change, in English and Greek. The Greek term for ‘maker’ (*poiētēs*) also means ‘poet’, and while this passage refers to the chained slaves losing their callings as carvers, bow-makers, armourers, potters, painters and losing their identities in the process, it also refers to the calling of the poet.

*Chapter XXVIII, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 1-3.** The slaves have not been carried to Africa or Asia (lions) or to south or central America (ocelots), or to Mesopotamia (Assyria) or to Greece or Asia Minor (where a Thracian phalanx, perhaps Alexander’s, might have marched) but they feel a oneness with all displaced people in such places. The ‘barracoons’ were temporary barracks where the slaves were confined before being shipped onwards.

**Stanzas 3-6.** The loss of anything in which we have invested emotional capital, however small, can trigger grief. Walcott sets out the stages of grief: for place, for family, for tools, for things left undone in the lost life, for anything trivial that is familiar. It is significant that the first of these, ‘the one pain that is inconsolable’, is the loss of place. Here, the suffering is the basis of their new nationhood, the thing that unites them, in the absence of shared origin or blood.

Walcott personalised the feelings of exile by saying, ‘every year, as I get older, it becomes more intensified, this physical nostalgia for simple things like warm sea, sun, a certain kind of food...the taste on the exile’s tongue is the taste of his childhood...So

there is an interior exile, however sublimated, in every writer who is not in his own territory...'<sup>23</sup>

**Stanzas 7-8.** They begin to lose their language. Among the lost words is 'never' (i.e. no-one could say such things would never happen) and the word 'again' will never fade (i.e. such things could and did happen time after time).

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### *Chapter XXIX.*

In St Lucia, Helen misses Achille, even though she is living with Hector. Seven Seas and Philocete discuss Achille's long absence and Seven Seas says he has gone to Africa to find his name and soul. In a dream walk back to the island, Achille surfaces through three hundred years of history of slavery, captivity and migration.

### *Chapter XXIX, Section i.*

**Stanzas 2-3.** Fearing that Achille will not return, Helen hears the dove as a monody (a poem of mourning for a death). It is not a Greek song for the death of Agamemnon, netted in a robe and murdered as he bathed, but the lost Caribbean sound of an Aruac flute.

Walcott overlays images by punning. The 'veined mesh of Agamemnon' is both the netting robe and, as a parallel to the hole in Helen's heart, the veins and arteries in

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<sup>23</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J. P. White, *Conversations with Derek Walcott* p. 159.



Agamemnon's body. The word 'twittered' suggests a less than noble death, the fluttering of a caged song-bird, while she hears the free-flying dove as a nobler sound, reminding of the death of the Aruac race.

**Stanza 6.** Helen becomes Penelope, who waited 20 years for the return of her husband Ulysses, fending off would-be suitors by weaving a shroud. Achille and his mate had been gone since yesterday, long enough for fears to grow. Walcott understands the complexities of unfaithfulness and despite her moving in with Hector allows Helen to be the faithful Penelope, because she has not given up her love for Achille.

*Chapter XXIX, Section ii.*

**Stanza 6.** 'a blind saint's, her name as bright as the island's ' is a reference to St Lucia. See note to II/i/15.

*Chapter XXIX, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 1-6.** The identities of the 'I' and Circe in this passage are uncertain. Hamner reads this as 'a grotesque dramatisation of all [Walcott's] male characters attempting to possess an unobtainable goddess'.<sup>24</sup> However, the context, with 'the chain of her bedside/lamp' and 'the headboard', surely excludes Hector, Achille and Philoctete, and the choice must narrow to the Narrator/Walcott and Major Plunkett. Despite the references to pigs, Plunkett and Maud seem unlikely to have shared such intimacy in

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<sup>24</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, p. 81.

recent years, nor Maud to have drunk to excess. Walcott may have tossed in a punning clue in Stanza 1 with 'yanked'. This passage reads like a description of an episode in the States, Walcott either with Norleen or with a partner such as his Greek Antigone. It is typical of Walcott to refer to a Greek woman by two classical names, Circe and Antigone.

**Stanzas 10-16.** Walcott creates a mosaic of history, supposedly to cover the 'three centuries' in Stanza 8 though he applies poetic licence.

'Kings lost their minds' could refer to George III of England (regn. 1760-1820) and Ludwig II of Bavaria (regn. 1864-86), but there were many mad kings.

'Jesuit mission' may refer to the burning of the Jesuit mission at Veracruz in 1606.

'Sephardic merchant' Following a lull in Inquisition activities in Peru in the early 1600's many Sephardic Jews of Portuguese origin fled to Lima and were successful as merchants. In 1634 the Inquisition returned and 64 were arrested. 63 were convicted and 12 burned at the stake.<sup>25</sup> Many then resettled in Dutch and English territories.<sup>26</sup>

Walcott included such a Jew in *Drums and Colours* in 1957.

Walcott wrote, in 'North and South':

and I remember once looking at my aunt's face,

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Palomino, *Jews in Peru* (Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1971, Vol 13.)  
<[http://www.geschichteinchronologie.ch/am-S/Peru/EncJud/EncJud\\_juden-in-Peru-ENGL.html](http://www.geschichteinchronologie.ch/am-S/Peru/EncJud/EncJud_juden-in-Peru-ENGL.html)>  
[accessed 20 Jan 2010]

<sup>26</sup> Frederic David Mocatta, *The Jews of Spain and Portugal and the Inquisition* (New York: Cooper Square Publications, 1973), p. 84.

the wintry blue eyes, the rusty hair, and thinking

maybe we are part Jewish, and felt a vein

run through this earth and clench itself like a fist

around an ancient root, and wanted the privilege

to be yet another of the races they fear and hate

instead of one of the haters and afraid.<sup>27</sup>

‘Curaçao’ The island was another destination for Jews fleeing Europe, first settled by twelve families originally from Spain and Portugal via Amsterdam in 1651, joined by another 70 people in 1659.<sup>28</sup> About 1800 there were 2000 Jews. The synagogue is the oldest in the Western Hemisphere in continuous use.<sup>29</sup>

‘snow-headed Negro’ was Toussaint Louverture, liberator of Haiti, who was imprisoned on Napoleon’s orders and died of pneumonia in 1803 in Château de Joux, Doubs, in the Jura, not the Pyrenees. Aimé Césaire gets the location right.<sup>30</sup> Walcott will have known this, but he moves the prison to the Pyrenees because he wanted to make a meaning-rhyme of ‘knees’ with ‘elbow’.

Toussaint was one of the four major figures (Columbus, Raleigh, Toussaint and George William Gordon) Walcott chose to represent discovery, exploitation, rebellion and independence in his 1957 play *Drums and Colours: an Epic Drama*, written to celebrate West Indian federation.

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<sup>27</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Fortunate Traveller*, and *Collected Poems*, p. 408.

<sup>28</sup> <<http://www.snoa.com/snoa.html>> [accessed 19 Dec 2010]

<sup>29</sup> Jan Rogoziński, *A Brief History of the Caribbean*, p. 300.

<sup>30</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, p. 91.

‘Port Royal’ is Port Royal, Jamaica, hit by an earthquake and tidal wave in 1692 and 1907.<sup>31</sup>

‘but the dark fathoms were godless’ gives another gloss on the Church of England’s view at the time. A form of service in 1693 begins:

For as much as it has pleased God, the great Creator and Judge of Heaven and Earth, on the Seventh Day of June, one Thousand six Hundred ninety two, justly to punish the Inhabitants of this Island for their manifold Sins and Wickednesses committed against His Divine Majesty, by a most terrible and dreadful Earthquake [...]<sup>32</sup>

Queen Victoria’s statue in St. William Grant Park is said to have revolved 180 degrees on its base in the 1907 earthquake.<sup>33</sup>

William Wilberforce campaigned in the House of Commons for the abolition of slavery. The reference to lightning and Saul refers to Wilberforce’s conversion to Christianity in 1785 and his subsequent taking up of the anti-slavery cause.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Colin G. Clarke, *Kingston, Jamaica: Urban Development and Social Change 1692-1962* (University of California Press, 1975) pp. 2 and 34.

<sup>32</sup> Church of England. ‘A form of prayer for a perpetual fast in the Island of Jamaica, on the seventh of June. Being the anniversary of the dreadful earthquake. London’, 1718. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Gale. University of Warwick Library. 14 Feb. 2011  
<<http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&contentSet=ECCOArticles&type=multipage&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&docId=CW3321444008&source=gale&userGroupName=warwick&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>>.

<sup>33</sup> <[http://www.all-jamaica.com/jamaica/foot\\_1\\_2.html](http://www.all-jamaica.com/jamaica/foot_1_2.html)> [accessed 19 Dec 2010]

<sup>34</sup> Robert Furneaux, *William Wilberforce* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974), pp 54 and 60.

Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in 1859. Walcott adapts the unavoidable conclusion from Darwin's book, that man is just another animal that has evolved, to fit his own placing of the sea as the creative element in *Omeros*.

Several attempts had been made to import European labour from 1836 to 1841, with no great success.<sup>35</sup> 'Fatel Rozack' was the ship carrying the first Indian indentured labourers from Calcutta to Port of Spain, Trinidad. The journey from late February to May 30, 1845 took some 96 days, 41 of those in getting to the first port of call at the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>36</sup> The importation of indentured labour ended in 1917, by which date some 430,000 Indians had come to the British West Indies, 4,000 of these to St. Lucia.<sup>37</sup>

**Stanzas 14-15.** 'made them all/fishes and men' Walcott plays with the words of Matthew 4 verse 19: 'And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.'

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### **Chapter XXX.**

Achille and his mate return from their trip. Achille is uplifted by his voyage and by the sea and his return home.

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<sup>35</sup> Henry H. Breen, *St Lucia: Historical, Statistical and Descriptive*, pp. 304-308.

<sup>36</sup> Dr Kusha Haracksingh, *90 Days of Horror* (Indo-Caribbean Heritage website) <<http://indocaribbeanheritage.com/content/view/17/38/>> [accessed 20 January 2010]

<sup>37</sup> K. O. Lawrence, *Immigration into the West Indies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (St Lawrence: Caribbean Universities Press, 1971), p. 26.

*Chapter XXX, Section i.*

**Stanza 2.** ‘You walk ?’ This joke, and the whole episode of a dream visit to Africa, is a reworking of the same in Walcott’s play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, first produced in 1967 (see Critical Introduction: Intertexts for more examples of such borrowings).

**Stanza 6.** ‘One *mako* size ‘ton,’ is a blue albacore, as big as a mako shark. This is an exaggeration, the albacore reaching about 5 feet at most while a mako can be 6 to 10 feet and larger.

**Stanza 7.** ‘its eye like a globed window/ringing with cold’ as an image has something in common with Wilbur’s 1987 poem ‘Wyeth’s Milk Cans’: ‘What if these two bells tolled?/They’d make the bark-splintering/Music of pure cold.’<sup>38</sup>

**Stanzas 7-8.** ‘The circular river of the current’ is the system of North Atlantic currents that consist principally of the Gulf Stream (or North Atlantic Current) carrying warm water up the east coast of the USA and across to Northern Europe, the southward-flowing Portugal Current, the Canary Current heading south along the North African coast and, carrying Achilles back, the North Equatorial Current that runs westward from Guinea to the West Indies.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Wilbur, *New and Collected Poems* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 25.

<sup>39</sup> <<http://oceancurrents.rsmas.miami.edu/atlantic/>> [accessed 17 Nov 2010]

**Stanza 13.** ‘Achille altered the rudder...’ Walcott echoes Breen’s description of the seas off the southwest coast of the island: ‘Here the sea, at a considerable distance from the land, rises up in mountains of foam, which succeed one another with great force and rapidity. The slightest contact with them is invariably attended with disastrous results; and the presence of mind, courage, adroitness, and physical force of the boatmen are put in requisition, to effect a passage between two breakers, without touching the one or being overtaken by the other.’<sup>40</sup>

**Stanza 17.** “‘The black bugger beautiful,/though!’” The phrase and its effect on Achille refer to the ‘Black is Beautiful’ movement in America from the 1960’s onward. This countered the widely-shared view that Negroid features, kinked hair and black skin were somehow less attractive than Caucasian ones and was part of the wider revaluation of blackness promoted by the Black Panther movement.<sup>41</sup>

*Chapter XXX, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 3-5.** Coming home safely is better than victory in battle, or fishing. It makes all men equal. The home-coming canoe symbolises more than a Caesar’s statue, is faster than his slave-driven war-galleys.

**Stanza 6.** The Narrator speaks. ‘Homeros’ is not the name Walcott uses for Homer, *Omeros*, in the poem. It applies here to Achille and is almost certainly a pun on ‘home’ and ‘Eros, god of erotic love’ (i.e. home-lover (and see LX/i/20), as is Walcott). ‘My nigger,/my captain’ implies extreme closeness, and is an echo of

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<sup>40</sup> Henry H. Breen, *St Lucia: Historical, Statistical and Descriptive*, p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 203.

Whitman's *O Captain! My Captain!* though unlike Whitman's captain, Walcott's is alive:

O Captain my Captain! our fearful trip is done,  
The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won,  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;  
But O heart! heart! heart!  
O the bleeding drops of red,  
Where on the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.<sup>42</sup>

***Chapter XXX, Section iii.***

**Stanzas 1-7.** The seven stanzas contain 21 lines, a virtuous number in Walcott's numerological use of threes in homage to Dante, because the digits 2 and 1 add together to again give 3. See Critical Introduction: Prosody for a discussion of numerology in the poem.

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***Chapter XXXI.***

Achille flashes back to the role of black soldiers in killing the American Indians and compares it to the wiping out of the Aruac by the Conquistador. As he clears Seven Seas' yard, he uncovers an Aruac relic and throws it away in superstitious terror.

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<sup>42</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings* (New York, London: W W Norton, 2002) p. 284.



Seven Seas tries to explain names and history to Achilles. Seven Seas claims to have been among the Ghost Dancers, the Sioux almost wiped out by the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry in the massacre of Wounded Knee in 1890.

*Chapter XXXI, Section i.*

**Stanza 3.** The Bob Marley lyric contains the words ‘There was a buffalo soldier in the heart of America,/stolen from Africa, brought to America,/fighting on arrival, fighting for survival’. and ‘If you know your history,/Then you would know where you coming from,/Then you wouldn’t have to ask me,/Who the ‘eck do I think I am.’<sup>43</sup> ‘Buffalo soldier’ was a Native American term for the black regiments in the US Army, originally the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry but then other units as well, maybe referring to their hair resembling buffalo pelts.

**Stanza 5.** ‘the sky’s blue screen’ shows that Achilles learned his American history from films. He will have learned the Hollywood version, simplified and slanted, as shown by ‘savages’ in Stanza 11.

**Stanza 6.** Achilles sees war bonnets in the fronds of the palm trees.

**Stanza 11.** The palm trash reminds Achilles of bodies. This whole episode is meant to show that blacks were capable of killing and oppression, as well as being victims. This is part of Walcott’s design for the Caribbean: accept the past and move on.

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<sup>43</sup> Bob Marley, *Buffalo Soldier* <<http://videokeman.com/bob-marley/buffalo-soldier-bob-marley/>> [accessed 22 January 2010]

*Chapter XXXI, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 6-7.** Achille's superstitious fear is rooted. In 1825, Coleridge wrote of a native superstition that the 'wood-slave' (iguana) attacked men and that contact caused leprosy.<sup>44</sup>

**Stanzas 8-9.** Seven Seas gives a false etymology for the pomme-Arac, to make a point about the Aruacs. The name is normally spelled 'pommerac' or 'pomerac', by a consonantal shift from the original 'pomme-Malac', the Malacca-Apple. The plant, which bears a red, pear-shaped fruit, was imported originally from Malasia (Malacca).<sup>45</sup>

**Stanzas 13-14.** Achille has unearthed a *zemi*, an Aruac idol in the form of a god. The Aruac worshipped nature and the ancestors. *Zemi* represented the gods and were kept in a *zemi* house, or were worn for protection. Similar *zemis* and their housing and worship were described in Haiti (Hispaniola) in 1498 by Fra Ramón Pané.<sup>46</sup> The face described is similar to that illustrated on a Carib or Aruac petroglyph in Devaux's *St Lucia Historic Sites*.<sup>47</sup>

*Chapter XXXI, Section iii.*

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<sup>44</sup> Henry Nelson Coleridge, *Six Months in the West Indies, in 1825* (London 1826 and Gale Cengage Learning 7 Feb 2011), p. 124.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*.

<sup>46</sup> Fra Ramón Pané, *An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians* ed. José Juan Arram, tr. Susan E Griswold (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), pp 21 and 25-6

<sup>47</sup> Robert J. Devaux, *St Lucia Historic Sites* (St Lucia: Saint Lucia National Trust, 1975), p. 12.

**Stanza 3.** Seven Seas' claim to have been a Ghost Dancer in the States is noted by Hamner as a veiled autobiographical link, for Walcott too is a kind of shaman who splits his time between the States and the Caribbean.<sup>48</sup> The Ghost Dance was a religious movement among the Plains Indians in the late 1880's, in the belief that if the dance was performed properly, the white men would all disappear and the Indian dead would all rise to share in an idyllic land where the grass was green and the buffalo plentiful again.<sup>49</sup>

**Stanzas 3-4.** The final quatrain is rare in *Omeros* in rhyming 'abba'. As Walcott has commented, there is a danger with quatrains of stopping the drive of the rhyme forwards. The 'abba' arrangement of rhymes is more likely to do so than the 'abab' one, due to the delayed return of the second 'a' rhyme. However, at the end of a chapter this scheme brings things to an appropriate halt.

**Stanza 4.** 'Sybils sweep the sand of our archipelago.' seems to refer to the raking of beaches at the tourist resorts and to the blind Seven Seas' visionary account of America. It could mean that even the ordinary West Indian has the gift of second sight.

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### ***Chapter XXXII.***

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<sup>48</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, p. 85.

<sup>49</sup> Rex Alan Smith, *Moon of Popping Trees* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), pp. 66-68.

Walcott/the Narrator visits his mother in her old-folks home. She is confused and only remembers him briefly. He sees Africa briefly in the twilight. He flies out to the States again, his plane watched by Achilles.

***Chapter XXXII, Section i.***

**Stanza 1.** The swift spends much of its life in flight, even sleeping on the wing. Its feet are designed for clinging to twigs or vertical surfaces and once grounded it finds it difficult to take off again unless the ground is smooth. The parallels in the opening lines of this chapter about Walcott's mother are deep-felt.

**Stanza 2.** The Marian Homes are sheltered homes for those with age-related or mental incapacities, founded and run by Catholic charitable groups like the Knights of Columbus or the Ursuline Sisters, or in Castries by the Carmelites.<sup>50</sup> Given the Walcotts' long disputes with the Catholic brothers on St Lucia, it is ironic, or perhaps warming, that Alix Walcott should have ended her days in a Marian Home. King records the disputes and that Walcott 'detested the cult of Mary and its popular iconography'.<sup>51</sup>

Walcott pronounces 'aged' as *eyjd* not *eyjid*.

**Stanza 11.** There is a poignant contrast here with Odysseus meeting his dead mother in Hades (*The Odyssey* Book 11), where 'She recognised me immediately'.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Charles Gachet FMI, *A History of the Roman Catholic Church in St Lucia*, p. 275.

<sup>51</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, pp. 36-40.

<sup>52</sup> Martin Hammond, translator of Homer, *The Odyssey*, p. 110.

**Stanza 13.** Alix says, ‘Sometimes I ask myself who I am’, recalling Achille, in XXIV/ii/30, who ‘asked himself who he was’, a key question for all West Indians.

*Chapter XXXII, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 3-4.** ‘I felt transported...to a place I had lost. It was another country.’

Walcott briefly reverses the transportation of the slaves, going back in his mind to Africa.

*Chapter XXXII, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 1-3.** This short 12 line section (a virtuous number again, see note to XXX/iii) is used by Walcott to tie together many of the threads and symbols in the narratives. ‘The moth’s swift shadow’ links the moth in his hotel room with his plane back to the States and to the swift that links Africa and the Caribbean. The ‘lateen sail’ is triangular, like the windsurfers and reminding of the Triangular Trade. The ‘hooked butterfly’ recalls Helen’s yellow dress and her treatment by the Plunketts. ‘The reef’s lilac shelf’ reminds with its colour of the mourning ink with which Midshipman Plunkett is recorded as dead in the log. ‘The minnow plane’ reminds of other occasions when a lone plane is watched across the sky. ‘The horned island’ is a recurring epithet, reminding of Achille’s cuckold state.

**Stanza 3.** By having the fictional-Achille watch the probably-real-Walcott’s plane, the fiction acquires more factual substance.

***Book 4.***

Walcott/the Narrator misses his partner. He is in the States living the bachelor life and reflects on what makes a home. He thinks of the exile and suffering of the Plains Indians and of the Southern slaves. Catherine Weldon is introduced as the intermediary for examining the history of the Sioux and the Massacre of Wounded Knee. Back in Boston, feeling the chill of discrimination, Walcott meets his father again, who advises him to cherish St Lucia for its simplicities.

***Chapter XXXIII.***

Walcott reflects on the end of summer on the Connecticut shore. Back in Boston, he lives like a bachelor recluse.<sup>1</sup> The chapter ends with a savage litany, almost an incantation, on what makes a house a home.

***Chapter XXXIII, Section i.***

**Stanzas 1-11.** The whole section is in rhyming triplets, marking its central position in the poem. Walcott's use of numerology is commented upon in the Critical Introduction: Prosody.

**Stanzas 1-6.** This section opens with an elegy to East Coast America's sense of isolation from the world, of being an eternal playground for the favoured. It is filled with resonances of decadence, the 'fin-de-siècle wave swells' most obviously, but

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 492

also has gnats fiddling (while Rome burns), (bread and) circuses, salad (days).

Walcott speaks of ‘an unceasing/self-deceit in an eternal republic’, forgetting its ‘vernal sin’ (its treatment of the Indians and the blacks), the pun on ‘venial’ signalled by the balm of a pardoning summer.

**Stanza 2.** The loon is a North American diver, one of whose characteristic calls is the tremolo sound that gave rise to the North American expression ‘laugh like a loon’.<sup>2</sup>

**Stanzas 7-9.** Walcott changes tone, sounding the warning that this summer must end. The reference to ‘Mayakovsky’s clouds in trousers’ recalls words from the Prologue to his 1915 poem, ‘If you wish, / I shall grow irreproachably tender,/not a man, but a cloud in trousers’, catching the sense of sadness and drifting. The poem was written in vernacular Russian and is deliberately anti-romantic. It ends with the poet being rejected by his lover Maria.<sup>3</sup>

**Stanzas 10-11.** Walcott underlines his nomadic state and his provincial origins in contrast to the USA, then distances himself from the politics of man, preferring to listen to nature, the surf hissing and sucking as it sinks into the sand. The anthems he has learned – *God Save the King* (or later *Queen*), *Sons and Daughters of St Lucia* and now *America the Beautiful* or *The Star-Spangled Banner* – mean nothing compared with the sounds of nature. See also the comment relating to the St Lucian anthem and Father Jesse in Critical Introduction: Autobiography.

### ***Chapter XXXIII, Section ii.***

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<sup>2</sup> <[http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/young\\_naturalists/loons/index.html](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/young_naturalists/loons/index.html)> [accessed 17 Nov 2010]

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Mayakovsky, *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, ed. Patricia Blake, tr. Max Hayward and George Reavey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 61.

**Stanza 3.** There have been numerous cases of Japanese ‘holdouts’ who preferred to remain hidden after the end of World War II, or who, like Lt Hiroo Onoda found on Lubang in 1974, did not know the war was over.<sup>4</sup>

**Stanza 4.** ‘my abandonment’ refers to Norline, his third wife, leaving. In his paranoia, he imagines everyone knows.

**Stanza 5.** ‘my own eyes had turned Japanese/looking for a letter’. The meaning is clear (they became slitted, picking up on the thought of the Jap soldier two stanzas earlier) but how they do so is also spelled out, because of one pun on ‘eyes’ and ‘I’s’ and another on two meanings of ‘turned’, the verticals of the I’s turned literally on their sides. The example has much in common with his play with letter forms to give concrete expression to the sense behind the words, discussed here in the section on Prosody. An alternative meaning is suggested by the Vapors’ 1980 hit record, *Turning Japanese*, popularly believed in the US to refer to the male expression during masturbation, though the band denied this.<sup>5</sup>

**Stanza 8.** ‘tossed’ is another probable reference to masturbation in English slang.

**Stanza 9.** ‘raft’ alludes to Book 5 of *The Odyssey* (see also LVIII/ii/7), where Odysseus must ‘start on his journey home [...] on a raft’.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <<http://history1900s.about.com/od/worldwarii/a/soldiersurr.htm>> [accessed 16 April 2010]

<sup>5</sup> <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turning\\_Japanese](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turning_Japanese)> [accessed 29 August 2010]

<sup>6</sup> Martin Hammond, (translator), *Homer: The Odyssey*, p. 47.



**Stanza 11.** The *Marie Celeste* (in fact the *Mary Celeste*, but fictionalised by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) was found abandoned by its crew in the Atlantic in 1872. Conan Doyle made it more of a mystery than it might have been. The truth may simply be that the crew thought the ship was sinking and took to the boats. They were never found.<sup>7</sup>

**Stanzas 12-16.** He sees Noline everywhere, until she ‘begins to recede/with shapes on a wharf’, recalling the coal-carriers of his father’s memory (XIII/ii/17) or ‘her elbow’ (like Helen’s VII/i/16) about to disappear ‘like a lizard’, recalling Achille in Seven Seas’ yard (XXI/ii/6-7).

**Stanza 13.** ‘trolley’ is the US term for what the British call a tram.

**Stanza 16.** The florist’s ‘sprinkled shelves’ probably refers to the cake decoration ‘hundreds-and-thousands’ in the UK or ‘sprinkles’ in the USA, brightly coloured like the flowers, but may simply be watering of the shelves to keep them moist.

**Stanza 17.** ‘the aisles of Vallombrosa’ may refer to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1:302):

Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strew the Brooks  
In *Vallombrosa*, where th’ *Etrurian* shades  
High overarch’t imbow’r;

However, Walcott’s reference to ‘aisles’ makes it more likely that he has in mind first John Edmund Reade’s 1838 poem *Italy: A Poem in Six Parts* (Canto 1:LXXXIX),

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<sup>7</sup> <<http://www.maryceleste.net/part2.htm>> [accessed 29 Jan 2011]

which speaks of 'Nature's own Minster ! who, thy arching aisles,/Dark Vallombrosa !  
hath in silence trod.' and then the Milton.<sup>8</sup> The reference is relevant for the literal  
meaning of the place-name, Shadowed Valley, with its biblical resonance.

**Stanza 18.** 'dewy gaze' is a cliché used in a self-mocking way.

*Chapter XXXIII, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 1-17.** See Critical Introduction: Autobiography and : Prosody for some  
discussion of meaning and an analysis of the poetics of this section.

Hamner sees the section as 'a miniature of the overlapping actions affecting the  
narrator and all the protagonists. In order to convert a house, a colony, or a nation  
into a home, the individual must confront inner as well as external sources of  
alienation.'<sup>9</sup>

Gilkes points out the frequency with which the home or house stands as a symbol of  
the undivided self in Naipaul's work and refers in a note to several examples from  
English literature where there is a relationship between Man's 'unhoused' condition  
and a lack of psychic 'wholeness'.<sup>10</sup> See also the note to XIV/ii/8 re  
'unaccommodated man'.

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<sup>8</sup> John Edmund Reade, *Italy, a Poem, in Six Parts* (1838) (Googlebooks, accessed 27 Jan 2011), p. 60.

<sup>9</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, p. 91.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Gilkes, *Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Novel* (Trinidad and Jamaica, London: Longman Caribbean, 1975), p. xx and note.

**Stanza 1.** ‘House of umbrage’, in the alternative meaning of ‘umbrage’ as ‘shadow’, alludes to Vallombrosa in the previous section.

**Stanza 2.** ‘shadows out of Allan Poe’ repeats the shadow theme and refers directly to Edgar Allan Poe’s 1835 ‘Shadow. – A Parable.’ and indirectly to much of Poe’s symbolism. Williams writes, ‘Poe’s texts themselves have an umbral quality, and “shady”, with its connotations of deception to the point of dishonesty as well as indeterminacy and gloom, is a gloss that could easily be extended to them. They are the products of or inhabited by shady characters who grasp – often in their own writing – at the shadows of memory, try to interpret shadowy signs, and frequently confront that indefinite representation of death which names itself as “Shadow”’.<sup>11</sup>

**Stanza 5.** The scratching branches and the cry, ‘Let me in!’ refer to Lockwood’s nightmare in *Wuthering Heights*.<sup>12</sup>

**Stanza 6.** Onan in the Bible (Genesis 38:v.9) spilled his seed upon the ground to avoid making his dead brother’s wife pregnant, and has become a byword for masturbation since.

**Stanzas 15-16.** There are echoes in ‘House that lets in, at last, those fears/that are its guests, to sit on chairs//feasts on their human faces, and/takes pity simply by the hand’ of James Elroy Flecker’s poem ‘Litany to Satan (from Baudelaire)’:

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Williams, *Poe’s “Shadow, - A Parable” and the Problem of Language* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, *American Literature* Vol 57, No. 4, Dec 1985), p. 623.

<sup>12</sup> Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* ed. Linda H. Peterson (Boston: Bedford Books, 1992), p. 42.

Thou stretchest forth a saving hand to keep

Such men as roam upon the roofs in sleep.

Satan, at last take pity on our pain.<sup>13</sup>

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### *Chapter XXXIV*

Walcott flies across the States, east to west, following the pioneers. He sees in the loss of the land by the Indians a parallel with his own loss of his wife, Norline. He thinks of the threatened idyll in which Catherine Weldon lived before the killing of Sitting Bull and the massacre at Wounded Knee.

### *Chapter XXXIV, Section i.*

**Stanza 1 onwards.** Critics have argued over the relevance of the Sioux/Weldon episodes to the thematic cohesion of *Omeros*. Hamner summarises the various positions taken (not repeated here) and is himself satisfied that the Sioux were equally dispossessed and merited inclusion as part of the history of post-Columbian imperialism.<sup>14</sup> Walcott may also have been influenced by the parallel, mentioned by him in XLIII/iii/3, of the disparate Indian tribes being brought together as a single nation, his ambition for the St Lucians and at one stage for the Caribbean.

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<sup>13</sup> James Elroy Flecker, *The Collected Poems of James Elroy Flecker* ed. Sir John Squire (London: Secker and Warburg, 1946), p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, pp. 92-95.

Walcott was thinking on the subject from the end of 1986, when the work that led to his play *The Ghost Dance* first began, and the obvious parallels will have been strongly in his mind.<sup>15</sup> The decision to include some treatment of the theme in *Omeros* may have been as Hamner believes, but it is also possible that the decision was in part politically programmatic. Americans cannot stand back from the misdeeds of foreign imperialists, nor yet from those of their Southern States ancestors, when they themselves are more widely implicated and benefitting from the consequences of such behaviour. The doctrine of Manifest Destiny (Stanza 6) may have been redundant once the Pacific was reached, but it still lingers as a commercial world view. The Caribbean is vulnerable to yet another wave of imperialism comparable to the ‘conquering of the West’ and ‘the white wagons’ still roll, with logos on their sides.

**Stanza 1.** ‘palomino’ horses have a golden coat and white mane and tail.

**Stanza 3.** The three repetitions of ‘white’ reflect the process of encroaching settlement.

**Stanzas 4-5.** ‘Our contracts/were torn like the clouds, like treaties with the Indians,/but with mutual treachery’ refers to his marriage with Norline, his ‘lost love’, which he sees as broken by both sides, unlike the Indian agreements which were only broken by the whites and the Government.

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<sup>15</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: a Caribbean Life*, p. 462.

**Stanza 6.** ‘Manifest Destiny’ was the doctrine that all of the continent was there for the taking by the white man and that westward expansion need stop only at the Pacific Ocean. Coined as a phrase by a journalist, John L O’Sullivan, in 1845.<sup>16</sup> It later came to embrace other ideas, including that of Anglo-Saxon superiority.

‘paradiso’ is a well-known make of ice-cream and an ironic reference to the American Dream’s artificial confection. It echoes Dante’s *Paradiso*.

‘the Sioux in the snow’ could be any or all of the 153 known dead but probably refers to Big Foot, a Lakota Sioux chief, famously photographed as a frozen corpse after the massacre at Wounded Knee 1890.<sup>17</sup>

***Chapter XXXIV, Section ii.***

**Stanzas 2-4.** The ‘Union Pacific’ railroad was extended westward and joined the Central Pacific to form the first transcontinental link. The ceremonial hammering of the last spike in 1869 is symbolic of the death of the age of the Indian in North America. Walcott compares his own stunned reaction to his loss of Norline with that of the Indians.

***Chapter XXXIV, Section iii.***

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<sup>16</sup> *Oxford Companion to United States History* ed. Paul S Boyer et al (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 470.

<sup>17</sup> Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli Paul and John E. Carter, *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee* (Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1991), pp. 112-3.

**Stanzas 1-9.** Walcott paints an idyllic and deliberately overblown picture of the West before the white man.

**Stanza 1.** Van Sickle traces the reference ‘*marram*’, a European sea-grass out of place in the Great Plains, to an Auden poem in *The Shield of Achilles*. However, he also deconstructs the word to its Old Norse roots of *mar-r* (sea) and *alm-r* (reed) then points out that Virgil’s cognomen was *Maro*, hence the pun ‘Virgilian reeds’.<sup>18</sup>

‘the Parkin farm’ is a reference to the farm owned by a half-Indian woman, Mrs Parkin, and her sister Mrs Van Solen near the Cannonball, a tributary of the Missouri river.<sup>19</sup> The farm lay just outside the Sioux reservation, a key position as Catherine Weldon had to seek permission to enter the reservation from the Indian agent, McLaughlin. The farm is also mentioned in 1893 in a story by an artist about his sketching trip, published only three years after Catherine Weldon’s time in the West. He also writes, somewhat erroneously:

Another curious character of this neighbourhood was a Mrs Weldon, who, with her son, maintained a farm at the mouth of the Cannonball [Not so, she was lodging on the Parkin farm]. Her peculiarity was a worshipful admiration of Sitting Bull. She had been in the habit for several years of sending him presents in the shape of money and all sorts of comforting things; and was never so pleased as when he visited her house for a week or so, as he often

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<sup>18</sup> John Van Sickle, ‘Virgilian Reeds - A Program Cue in Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*.’ (*Vergilius* 51, 2005), pp. 38-40.

<sup>19</sup> Eileen Pollack, *Woman Walking Ahead: in Search of Catherine Weldon and Sitting Bull* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), pp. 93-5.

did.’<sup>20</sup> The writer also claims to have met Sitting Bull on the road. If true, his sketching trip must have taken place between June 1889, when Weldon first moved west and December 1890 when Sitting Bull was killed.

This reflects the commonly held view of a romantic attachment between Weldon and Sitting Bull that never seems to have existed.

**Stanzas 6-7.** The death of Weldon’s son Christie from lockjaw is not allowed to disturb the idyll.

**Stanza 7.** Weldon, known by the Indians as Woman-Walking-Ahead, was a widow in her fifties when she went west in 1889 as a member of the National Indian Defence Association to help Sitting Bull represent his people against the government. The following year she returned to live in his camp but stridently opposed the Ghost Dance and fell out with Sitting Bull because of that. She left the camp in October 1890, two months before Sitting Bull was killed. Walcott may, with the reference to her husband, be accepting a press assumption at the time about her personal relationship to Sitting Bull or simply, as with other ‘facts’ such as her living in Boston, not New York, or being a hand in Bill Cody’s circus, creating a fictional truth. The *Bismarck Tribune* of 2 July 1889 reported her presence, got her name wrong as ‘Mrs Wilder’, said she used the most scathing and abusive language against

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Man-afraid-of-his-name’ ‘Sketching Among the Sioux’ (*Outing Vol XXIII Number I*, October 1893) pp. 4-6. (The pseudonym is a presumably-white author’s skit on the Indian name Man-Afraid-of-his-Horses, a white contraction of a much longer name, Man-of-Whose-Very-Horses-the-Enemy-is-Afraid. See Rex Alan Smith, *Moon of Popping Trees*, p.17. Another such Indian name is recorded in the same work, p. 151, Afraid-of-Bear).



the Indian agent and then stated 'it is gossip among the people in the vicinity of the Agency that she is actually in love with the cunning old warrior.'<sup>21</sup>

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*Chapter XXXV.*

Walcott appears as author, researching and seeking characters for his work. He visits Georgia, where the Trail of Tears began and thinks of black slaves. Catherine Weldon speaks of her love for the Indians and regrets the breaking of the treaties with them. Walcott seizes on her loss as greater than his own, easing his sorrow through that of the Indians.

*Chapter XXXV, Section i.*

**Stanza 1.** 'the Trail of Tears' describes the forced relocation under the Indian Removal Act (1830) of Native Americans from their lands in the South-Eastern States in the 1830's. Following a 'negotiated' ceding of lands to the Government, the Choctaws from Mississippi were to emigrate west of the Mississippi to what became Oklahoma ('red people' in Choctaw), starting in November 1831. The removal was botched and the weather inclement. Of 17,000 who made the journey, between 2,500 and 6,000 died. A Choctaw chief is quoted by the *Arkansas Gazette* as saying the removal was 'a trail of tears and death'. The Choctaw were followed by the Seminole from Florida (1832), the Creek from Georgia and Alabama (1834), the Chickasaw from Mississippi (1837) and the Cherokee from Georgia (1838). Some resisted or

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<sup>21</sup> Rex Alan Smith, *Moon of Popping Trees*, pp. 101-2.

evaded removal. The Cherokee removal resulted in about 4000 deaths out of some 12,000 to 16,000.<sup>22</sup>

It is ironic that the Indians themselves held slaves. Chickasaws captured Choctaws, Crees took Sioux, Apaches and Comanches held Pawnees and vice versa. Many of these were sold to the French for guns.<sup>23</sup> The Seminoles and Apalachicolas held black slaves and took them with them when they were obliged to relocate westward.<sup>24</sup> Walcott has simplified for effect.

**Stanzas 3-4.** 'how Greek it was' Slavery was the norm in Ancient Greece, yet also Greek here in the sense of 'incomprehensible'. The presence of slavery in an idyllic-seeming society cannot be explained, nor can slave plantations fit easily with 'the Jeffersonian ideal', meaning here either his ideas on architecture (he designed his home Monticello in the neoclassical style) or his belief in man's connection to the land and that the strength of the state lay in the yeoman farmer.<sup>25</sup>

**Stanza 6.** Seven Seas has previously claimed to Achille that he had been a Ghost Dancer (XXXI/iii/3) and now Walcott sees him on the Trail of Tears as a medicine man with a rattle. Seven Seas represents the shaman and griot down the ages and will later merge with the Homer figure (LVI/i/8-11).

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<sup>22</sup> Pauline Maier, Merritt Roe Smith, Alexander Keyssar and Daniel J Kevles, *Inventing America: A History of the United States* (New York and London: WW Norton, 2003), pp. 364-5.

<sup>23</sup> Colin G. Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West Before Lewis and Clark* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), pp. 315-8.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel F. Littlefield Jr., *Africans and Seminoles from Removal to Emancipation* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1977), pp. 49-50.

<sup>25</sup> Pauline Maier, Merritt Roe Smith, Alexander Keyssar and Daniel J. Kevles, *Inventing America: A History of the United States*, p. 286.

**Stanzas 7-12.** Walcott imagines the life of the Southern slaves, fugitives hunted down by bloodhounds, lynched by hooded and peaked Klansmen, worked in the cotton fields and chained, while horses were treated far better. Psalm 23, 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures', did not apply to slaves.

**Stanza 9.** 'the gibbet branches of a silk-cotton tree' The image of black slaves hung in a silk-cotton tree like fruit bats was used twenty years earlier by Walcott in *Mass Man*.<sup>26</sup> Baugh comments on that poem that the silk-cotton tree is traditionally said to be haunted by the ghosts of dead slaves and that Walcott is reliving past trauma.<sup>27</sup> Though the tree may have been used for lynching in the Caribbean, its sub-tropical range does not include most of the Southern United States, where other trees will have served, including the cottonwood poplar. Walcott may have been reminded of this by the lyric to Billie Holiday's song *Strange Fruit*: 'Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,/Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.'<sup>28</sup>

**Stanza 12.** In 'horses sagely grazed' there may be an echo of 'sheep may safely graze' from the Bach Cantata BWV 208, 'The lively hunt is all my heart's desire'.

*Chapter XXXV, Section ii.*

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<sup>26</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Gulf and Other Poems*, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Baugh, *Derek Walcott*, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> <<http://www.lyricsfreak.com/b/billie+holiday/strange+fruit20017859.html>> [accessed 12 February 2011]

**Stanza 1.** The natural trembling of the aspen leaves leads to its being called the Quaking Aspen. It is one of the poplar family, *populus tremuloides*, and is found in North America.<sup>29</sup>

**Stanza 6.** ‘More and more we learn to do without/those we still love. With my father it was the same.’ are Catherine Weldon’s words, but could equally be Walcott, speaking of his failed marriage (‘still’ is a strong hint) and of his father whom he never knew.

**Stanzas 9-10.** Sitting Bull spent a few months in 1884 and 1885 travelling the East Coast of the States with Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show, to be introduced as the killer of Custer and be booed and hissed. He was paid \$50 per week. Smith believes he took no part in the fighting, which was led by Gall and Crazy Horse, but the whites believed he did. The exaggerated reputation he gained in those shows may have contributed to him being regarded as so influential in 1890 during the Ghost Dancing and therefore may have contributed indirectly to his death and to the Massacre at Wounded Knee. Weldon did not work in the show. Her presence is a Walcott fiction that gives a reason for her love for the Indians.<sup>30</sup>

**Chapter XXXV, Section iii.**

**Stanza 3.** ‘circled her scalp’ refers to the practice of scalping, exercised by some North American Indians, but also by some of their white enemies, whether planned

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<sup>29</sup> <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Populus\\_tremuloides](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Populus_tremuloides)> [accessed 17 Nov 2010]

<sup>30</sup> Rex Alan Smith, *Moon of Popping Trees*, p. 100. Hamner reports Walcott (*Epic of the Dispossessed* p 98.) saying he read this book during his research for his play *The Ghost Dance* [and therefore while he was writing *Omeros*].

(witness the bounty for Indian scalps offered by the governments of Connecticut and Massachusetts) or unplanned (as with the scalping and mutilation of 200 peaceful Cheyenne by the Colorado Third Cavalry at Sand Creek in 1863).<sup>31</sup>

**Stanza 5.** ‘Versailles’ See note to V/iii/24.

**Stanzas 9 and 13.** Walcott is flying and reading about Catherine. This is one of several places where he makes an appearance as author, not just Narrator.

**Stanzas 9-10.** The New World as an Eden where all is possible is one element of Walcott’s philosophy for the Caribbean, but here the reference is to North America and is more loaded. History (his book about Weldon) is futile (like Plunkett’s search). There was no need for conflict with the Indians, there was room for all Adams to enjoy their Eden. Catherine Weldon had that sort of innocence.

He may also be punning on Adams, thinking perhaps of Samuel Adams, proponent of independence and confederation, John Adams, Revolutionary politician, John Quincy Adams (see note to XXXVIII/ii/4) or his grandson Henry, both anti-slavery, or even Ansel Adams, photographer of the natural beauty of the American West.

**Stanzas 12-14.** Walcott explains why he chose Weldon. His own loss (of his third marriage) is lessened by contemplating the greater tragedy of Weldon and the Sioux, the Crows and the Dakotas.

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<sup>31</sup> <[http://www.lakesregionofmaine.gen.me.us/sebago\\_anthro/faq\\_nq/scalping.html](http://www.lakesregionofmaine.gen.me.us/sebago_anthro/faq_nq/scalping.html)> [accessed 16 April 2010] and Jeffrey Ostler, *The Plains Sioux and US Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 45.

**Stanza 21.** ‘springs that never fail’ echoes Gerard Manley Hopkins *Heaven-Haven*, ‘I have desired to go/where springs do not fail’.<sup>32</sup>

It is not clear whether the Hebron is the Biblical Hebron, but it is ironic that the present-day Hebron in Israel and Palestine is heavily polluted.<sup>33</sup>

**Stanza 22.** ‘The Indian agent’ is James McLaughlin, responsible for the supervision of Sitting Bull’s Sioux reservation, with whom Weldon had a long and acrimonious battle, seeking permission to visit Sitting Bull and for him to travel with her off the reservation. It was McLaughlin who in 1890 sent the Indian police to arrest Sitting Bull, an attempt that ended in his death with seven of his followers, together with six of the police. All the dead were Lakota Sioux. Two weeks later, the massacre at Wounded Knee killed over 200 Lakota men, women and children.<sup>34</sup>

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### ***Chapter XXXVI.***

Walcott visits the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and reflects on Art and History. He discovers Winslow Homer’s picture, *The Gulf Stream*, and sees Achilles in it. He is made conscious of his colour. He visits Marblehead and meets his father, who tells him he must travel before he can return home to the island. He is warned to cherish St Lucia for its ‘green simplicities’.

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<sup>32</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Sourcebook*, p. 113.

<sup>33</sup> IRIN Humanitarian News <<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportID=76035>> [accessed 26 January 2010].

<sup>34</sup> Eileen Pollack, *Woman Walking Ahead: in Search of Catherine Weldon and Sitting Bull*, pp. 148-152 and 346.

*Chapter XXXVI, Section i.*

**Stanza 10.** ‘My main man’ is colloquial for ‘my important man, my friend’ but Walcott may also be punning on ‘main’ meaning ‘sea’. ‘my nigger’ means my best friend and is emphatic.<sup>35</sup> Walcott’s use of the latter phrase emphasises that he is also black and celebrates their blackness. The phrase cannot normally be used by a white without extreme offence.

**Stanzas 10 and 12.** The work referred to is by Winslow Homer, a painter Walcott admired for his truthful representation of colour in his Caribbean scenes.<sup>36</sup> *The Gulf Stream* normally hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Walcott may have seen it in Boston during a loan period, or may be using licence to make a point. It shows a lone black sailor mid-ocean on a dismasted and rudderless boat beset by sharks. Walcott used *The Gulf Stream* as a model. King reports a close imitation by him in the John Gillespie Collection in Trinidad.<sup>37</sup>

**Stanza 11.** ‘chain-sawing sharks’ reverses the image in I/i/17, where the chainsaw is likened to a shark.

‘Luffed’ means sailing close to (i.e. almost into) the wind. The effect is to slow or stop the ship, leaving the sails flapping. Given the direction of the Trade Winds, blowing from the Guinea coast of Africa towards the Caribbean, any black sailor

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<sup>35</sup> *New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, pp. 350-351.

<sup>37</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 607.

attempting to return to Africa (the tribal dream) is, like this one, doomed to fail. The metaphor is not present in the picture, as Homer painted the boat as dismantled.

**Stanzas 13-19.** Walcott draws comparisons based on his experience of discrimination. He and Achilles are threatened all the time by 'leprous columns', whether ingrained assumptions like Melville's or active discrimination like the cab drivers'. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, has an impressive façade of white Ionic columns to its Fenway rear entrance. Walcott comments by apposition on the contrast between their classical form and the columns of black soldiers on the Saint-Gaudens memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and his Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment on Boston Common. The white columns are touched by a sun that is declining 'on the g[u]ilt of the State House dome'. The black soldiers are in darkness.

**Stanzas 14-15.** Walcott uses the caricatured syntax and pronunciation of the Southern slave to mock Melville's reactionary attitude to whites and blacks. The full extract from Chapter 42 of *Moby-Dick*<sup>38</sup> is '*...Caesarian, heir to overlordship Rome, having for the imperial colour the same imperial hue; and though this pre-eminence in it applies to the human race itself, giving the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe...*'. Walcott's editing of the passage highlights his point.

'Dem steps in de dusk' may refer to Melville's *Journal* or to his *Clarel: a Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (pub 1876), an 18,000-line epic poem which contains a passage where a masque is performed of the Wandering Jew, and Derwent and the

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<sup>38</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (London, Penguin Classics 2003)



Lesbian descend at the monastery of Mar Saba to the depths of Brook Kedron.<sup>39</sup>

Harrison Hayford in his commentary<sup>40</sup> notes that this has a parallel in the 1856/57

Journal that Melville kept: '*At dusk went down by many stone steps... to bottom of Brook Kedron*'. Walcott repeats 'dusk' three times to poke fun at Melville's racism.

**Stanza 16.** Augustus Saint-Gaudens modelled many of the memorials for the American Civil War.<sup>41</sup> He also designed a new American double-eagle coin for Theodore Roosevelt, an interesting coincidence for *Omeros* in that the coin omitted the words 'In God We Trust' normally on US coinage until the public and Congress insisted they be added.<sup>42</sup>

**Stanzas 18-19.** Ahab is Melville's captain, obsessed with chasing the whale Moby Dick. Queequeg is his Polynesian harpooner.

**Stanza 19.** Burnett sees in the final line 'the symbolic replacement of the hieratic by the demotic, as dusk brings the dominion of blackness.'<sup>43</sup> The lights of the 'temple', the museum, domain of the priestly caste, are replaced by those of the street, where the people are in charge.

### *Chapter XXXVI, Section ii.*

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<sup>39</sup> Herman Melville, *Clarel; a poem and pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, ed. by Walter E Bezanson (New York: Hendricks House, 1960), pp. 349-354 and 375.

<sup>40</sup> Herman Melville, *Clarel: a poem and pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, fwd. by Hershel Parker, editor Harrison Hayford (Northwestern University Press 2008)

<sup>41</sup> Anon., *Augustus Saint-Gaudens 1848-1907: Un maître de la sculpture américaine* (Paris: Somogy Editions D'Art, 1999), pp. 130-4.

<sup>42</sup> <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint\\_Gaudens\\_Double\\_Eagle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Gaudens_Double_Eagle)> [accessed 30 Jan 2011]

<sup>43</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 58.

**Stanzas 1-2.** ‘a New England’ is meant to be read both ways, emphasising that after the old England’s treatment of the blacks, the new England did the same to the Indian tribes. There is irony in the suburban imagery.

**Stanza 4.** ‘Melville’s Bible’ alludes to Hermann Melville’s particular reading of it (including white superiority) as well as the extensive use of biblical allusion in his works, a not uncommon feature of 19<sup>th</sup> century writing. Wright found 155 biblical references in *Moby Dick* alone and some 650 over the whole oeuvre.<sup>44</sup>

*Chapter XXXVI, Section iii.*

**Stanza 6.** Winslow Homer refers to the painter mentioned in XXXVI/i/10-12.

**Stanza 11.** ‘in from the cold’ echoes the title of John le Carré’s 1963 novel *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold*.

**Stanzas 13-22.** Warwick says he settled for small achievements, didn’t seek to improve and was happy to dominate his small circle. Walcott is being critical of his father and justifying his own sacrifices and ambition. He then redresses the balance by warning of pride and praising the island’s ‘green simplicities’.

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<sup>44</sup> Nathalie Wright, *Biblical Allusion in Melville’s Prose* (Durham NC: Duke University Press American Literature Vol 12, No 2, May 1940), p. 185.

***Book 5.***

Book 5 is about Europe's role in History, and the death of empire. Walcott/the Narrator travels the Old World and North America. He sees how the world was once divided for exploitation between Portugal and Spain, sees indifference and the decay of empire in London, visits Joyce's haunts in an Ireland divided by religion. He sees Odysseus wandering the Mediterranean and reflects on how Art can coexist with History's oppression. Back in North America, he sees the end of the Plains Indians.

***Chapter XXXVII.***

Walcott moves back and forth between Lisbon and Port of Spain, Trinidad. The faded stone grandeur of Lisbon is contrasted with the colonies. Empire is over, trade has died.

***Chapter XXXVII, Section i.***

**Stanza 1.** 'I crossed my meridian.' Walcott has said, 'The idea of division is permanent in all countries that have been colonial. It is a shadow, a kind of meridian, a crossing that has to be examined.'<sup>1</sup> Here he sets out to examine the sources of the practices of slavery and colonial exploitation.

**Stanza 2.** 'Ulissibona' is Walcott's version of Olissipo or Ulyssipona (sic), apocryphally named after Ulysses (Odysseus, reputed to have founded Lisbon on his

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J. P. White 1990, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 156.

journey home to Ithaca after the Trojan War).<sup>2</sup> Portugal is an appropriate place to begin in Europe, because it was first to exploit African slaves in the early 1400's.<sup>3</sup>

**Stanza 3.** Walcott makes his metaphors work their passage. 'turtleback alleys' describes the centrally humped surface squared with cobbles like a turtle's shell, and also fits with the slowness of walking the alleys up the heights of Lisbon.

**Stanza 4.** 'crawled from the sea, not towards it' refers to anabasis and is probably an oblique homage to St John Perse's seminal work of the same name.

**Stanza 9.** 'an old Portugee leathery as Portugal, via Madeira,' The Portugese in the West Indies came largely from Madeira, many for economic reasons from 1846 when the wine industry in the island was in decline. Some were also fleeing Catholic persecution of their Presbyterian faith.<sup>4</sup>

**Stanzas 9-10.** Sunday, in his white suit and black-banded hat, is like a negative of Baron Samedi (Baron Saturday), the voodoo figure in black tail-coat and top-hat. Baron Samedi has the power to raise the almost-dead and Sunday does the same by rewinding his watch..

***Chapter XXXVII, Section ii.***

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<sup>2</sup> J. B. Trend, *Portugal* (London: Ernest Benn, 1957), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, p. 107.

<sup>4</sup> Jo-Ann S Ferreira, *The Portuguese of Trinidad*, from *The Book of Trinidad*, ed. Gérard Besson and Bridget Brereton, (Port of Spain: Paria Publishing, 1991) and <[http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~portwestind/diaspora/west\\_indies/trinidad\\_and\\_tobago.htm](http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~portwestind/diaspora/west_indies/trinidad_and_tobago.htm)> [accessed 28 January 2010].

**Stanza 2.** Pope Alexander VI resolved growing disputes between Spain and Portugal over new territories. A treaty in 1494 provided that everything west of a line running north to south, 100 leagues west from Cape Verde Islands, should belong to Spain, everything east of it to Portugal, except for lands already occupied in 1492 by one or the other.

**Stanza 4.** ‘my forked shadow swayed to the same brass pendulum’ has something of Eliot’s *Sweeney Erect* about it:

(The lengthened shadow of a man  
Is history, said Emerson  
Who had not seen the silhouette  
Of Sweeney straddled in the sun.)<sup>5</sup>

(See also note to XLI/iii/8 on the Transcendentals)

**Stanzas 6-7.** Walcott imagines himself in a line of slaves tied by the neck in a coffle.

*Chapter XXXVII, Section iii.*

**Stanza 1.** ‘A bronze horseman’ is the statue of King José I in Praça do Comércio, Lisbon.

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<sup>5</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 43.

**Stanza 3.** Portugal did not capture, still less recapture Genoa. The reference is to ‘recapturing’ Christopher Columbus, born in Genoa, who in 1484 petitioned the Portugese king for patronage and was turned down, subsequently gaining acceptance by the rival Castilian court for his venture westwards.<sup>6</sup>

**Stanza 6.** ‘the stone Don’ is the statue of Don Alvaro in Mozart’s opera Don Giovanni. Don Juan has killed Don Alvaro, whose statue will eventually drag the seducer down to hell.

**Stanza 12.** Traditional ‘fado’ is Portuguese music in which the (usually female) performer sings of some irretrievable loss. The voice is usually plaintive, with a tremolo quality, and accompanied by mandolin or guitar.

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***Chapter XXXVIII.***

London, England and the Empire are seen in company with the vagrant Homer and found wanting. Everything is dirt and commerce, or dead History.

***Chapter XXXVIII, Section i.***

**Stanza 1.** ‘the circle of Charing Cross’ - Walcott enjoys the contradiction between cross (the place-name derives from a memorial raised by Edward I where his dead

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<sup>6</sup> Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 46-7.

wife Eleanor's body rested overnight) and the circular symbol for an Underground station.

There is additional symbolism in the repeated references to hell ('scorched summer light', 'embers of sparrows' and the poet arising from the 'circle' of Charing Cross, which seasoned London travellers will know can feel like a circle of Hell in summer heat).

**Stanzas 1, 3 and 6.** London landmarks. Just along from Charing Cross station, 'the National' is the National Gallery, the art gallery in Trafalgar Square. A walk from one to the other passes St Martin-in-the-Fields church.

**Stanza 2.** The Pharos was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. A tower at Alexandria in Egypt built as a lighthouse, its name came to mean a lighthouse anywhere. Built about 280 BC, it was destroyed in an earthquake in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup>

**Stanza 5.** 'it broke off the icing/from wedding-cake London' – Homer intrudes on the superficial self-satisfaction of the capital, with its white architecture. He takes the gilt off the gingerbread.

**Stanza 6.** 'the Isle of Dogs' is an area of East London, enclosed by a loop of the Thames, where the new West India Docks were built in 1802 for the import of rum and sugar, an essential leg in the Triangular Trade that exploited slavery. In contrast, 'Westminster Bridge' refers to Wordsworth's poem 'Composed upon Westminster

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick Hanks, editor, *Collins English Dictionary*.

Bridge' (written a week after the new dock was officially opened!) in which London on its river is romanticised as a place of beauty.

**Stanza 7.** 'shop-paper' is strong brown paper used for wrapping.<sup>8</sup>

**Stanzas 9-10.** The incident with the churchwarden reminds of Father Jesse, who showed little charity to the young Walcott (see Critical Introduction: Autobiography). Walcott could be wreaking a belated revenge for the priest's attack on his early poem.

**Stanza 11.** 'soutane' is a metonym for the church-warden.

*Chapter XXXVIII, Section ii.*

**Stanza 3.** The reference is to a poem by William Dunbar (1465-1520?) 'In Honour of the City of London', written about 1500, each verse of which ends, "London, thou art the flour (sic) of Cities all'. Its resonance for *Omeros* is increased by the first lines of the second verse: "Gladdith anon, thou lusty Troynovaunt/Citie that some tyme cleped was New Troy..."

There are two bronze Sphinxes at the base of Cleopatra's Needle beside the Thames. Cleopatra's Needle is an obelisk brought from Egypt in 1879 and the Sphinxes were sculpted by C H Mabey in 1882.

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*.



**Stanza 4.** The church of All-Hallows by the Tower stands on earlier Roman remains and among other connections was the church where John Quincy Adams, 6<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, married in 1797.

**Stanza 7.** ‘the Outer Provinces’ is ironic usage. Though the British Empire would never have used the term (preferring ‘the colonies’), the term was used by the Chinese, the Eighteen Provinces being the Han-dominated centre protected by the Great Wall, everything else being the Outer Provinces. Walcott is reminded of it by the ginkgo trees, a fossil species that survived only in China until spread by gardeners. *Ginkgo biloba* is so-called because its leaves are deeply divided into two lobes, a fact that might have given it further interest for a Walcott ‘divided to the vein’ (‘A Far Cry from Africa’).<sup>9</sup>

**Stanza 11.** ‘And the sunflower sets after all’ refers to the British Empire ‘on which the sun never sets’.

The inclusion of sunflower and irises in the same line is a joke. Van Gogh’s *Vase with Fifteen Sunflowers* more than trebled previous auction records in 1987 and was followed shortly by his *Irises*, which almost doubled the record again. For a period that includes the writing of *Omeros*, these paintings were much in the news.

***Chapter XXXVIII, Section iii.***

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<sup>9</sup> Derek Walcott, *In a Green Night, Poems 1948-60*, republished in *Collected Poems 1948-84*, pp. 17-18.

**Stanzas 1-13.** This section, a sustained lament for the forgotten peoples whose suffering and labour built the Empire, echoes the children's playground rhyme 'Oranges and Lemons' in its question and answer style.

The rhyme opens:

"Oranges and lemons" say the bells of St. Clement's

"You owe me five farthings" say the bells of St. Martin's

"When will you pay me?" say the bells of Old Bailey

"When I grow rich" say the bells of Shoreditch

In this section, Walcott damns the Empire for its neglect of his people, who can be found nowhere among the monuments and institutions of the capital. They are bought and sold like corn, lower than the rooks, less cared for than the swans. Christ is in the National Gallery, in the architecture, not in the streets. His people's peace on earth is moonshine, nonsense.

**Stanza 1.** Lines 2-3 may refer to Handel's *Samson*, 'There lies our hope'.

**Stanza 2.** Big Ben is the bell that strikes the hour at the Houses of Parliament.

The reference to 'alchemical corn and the light it yields' is obscure, but has resonances of Freemasonry and Alchemy, the supposed ability of the Philosopher's Stone to turn anything into gold. It refers back to XXXVII/ii/6. It seems to mean that the imported corn (i.e. the proceeds of the subjugated races) once turned to riches, but no longer does so.

**Stanza 3.** In Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey, many of England's greatest writers are buried, including Chaucer, Tennyson and Edmund Spenser, or commemorated, including Marlowe and Shakespeare.

The Christmas concerts from St. Martin-in-the-Fields are an institution.

**Stanza 5.** 'Glen-da-Lough' see note to XXXIX/i/8 below.

'the ivied grange' is an ironic cliché and therefore difficult to trace to a particular reference Walcott may have in mind. It appears in George Bartram's *Ballads of Ghostly Shires* " "Knowest thou," said the ranger bold/ "the ivied grange on Wedmerswold"', and given the tenor of this passage in *Omeros*, that may be Walcott's model.<sup>10</sup>

**Stanza 6.** 'The Corn Exchange' is a London market for bulk dealing in corn. Similar markets existed in many major cities.

'pleasant pastures' refers to William Blake's preface to *Milton, a Poem* which contains *The New Jerusalem*. It opens:

And did those feet in ancient time.  
Walk upon England's mountains green:  
And was the holy Lamb of God,  
On England's pleasant pastures seen!

Set to music by Sir Hubert Parry and orchestrated by Sir Edward Elgar, 'Jerusalem' is England's most popular patriotic song, sung by huge audiences at the close of the

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<sup>10</sup> George Bartram, *Ballads of Ghostly Shires: Folk Lore Verses* (London: Greening, 1900), p. 80.

annual series of Promenade Concerts in the Royal Albert Hall and as a hymn in some churches on St George's Day.

The 'green baize-table' (sic) may refer to the practice of covering card-tables in baize (i.e. that the pleasant pastures are to be found among gamblers), but may be the table at which landlords collected rents.

Walcott is ironic. There are no such pleasant pastures for the subjects of Empire, however patriotic. The Corn Exchange deals in the fruits of their labour, which will be ground by Blake's 'dark Satanic Mills', supposed to be Boulton and Watt's industrialised Albion Flour Mills in London, burned down some 10 years before Blake published *Milton*, though the poem contains no such indication.<sup>11</sup>

**Stanza 7.** 'the Bloody Tower' is the tower within the Tower of London that became notorious as a prison and place of murder, for example of the little princes Edward V and his brother (some say on the orders of the future Richard III, others on those of the future Henry VII).<sup>12</sup>

**Stanza 8.** Unmarked mute swans in open water in England belong to the Crown, and to the mediaeval guilds of the Vintners and the Dyers. Once a year the young swans are ringed to show the ownership.<sup>13</sup> The Serpentine is a lake in Hyde Park in London. Alliteration on 's' gives concrete expression to the swans.

**Stanza 9.** 'the harps of the willows' is a reference to Psalm 137: 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion./We hanged our harps upon the willows'.

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<sup>11</sup> <<http://poetry.eserver.org/new-jerusalem.html>> [accessed 21 Dec 2010]

<sup>12</sup> <<http://www.toweroflondontour.com/bloodytw.html>> [accessed 19 Nov 2010]

<sup>13</sup> <<http://www.thamesweb.co.uk/windsor/windsor1999/upping.html>> [accessed 19 Nov 2010]

‘Margate Sands’ refers to T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (III line 300) which continues:

‘On Margate Sands.  
I can connect  
Nothing with nothing.  
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.  
My people humble people who expect  
Nothing.’<sup>14</sup>

**Stanzas 10-13.** Hamner draws attention to the connection between ‘light of the world’, ‘crystals of sweat’ and ‘Brixton’.<sup>15</sup> Apart from being Holman Hunt’s painting (see below), ‘Light of the World’<sup>16</sup> is the poem in which Walcott writes of his love for the ordinary people of St Lucia, sugar crystals are earned by the sweat of plantation labourers and Brixton was the scene of riots by the under-privileged blacks in 1981 and 1985. All refer to the struggle of the ordinary black, in contrast to the ‘National Gallery’, ‘Palladian Wren’ and ‘the City’, a list that neatly encompasses Art, Religion and Commerce.<sup>17</sup>

**Stanza 10.** William Holman Hunt’s painting of Christ, ‘The Light of the World’, exists in two main versions, one of which is in St Paul’s Cathedral (‘Palladian Wren’),

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<sup>14</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 70.

<sup>15</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, p. 112.

<sup>16</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Arkansas Testament*, p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Tavernor, *Palladio and Palladianism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), pp. 148-9.

the other owned by Keble College, Oxford.<sup>18</sup> One version or the other has at times been shown in the National Gallery.

**Stanza 11.** ‘where is our sublunar peace’ has a faint echo of Lowell’s ‘where is our pastoral adolescence’ in ‘The Golden Summer’.<sup>19</sup> See note to LI/ii/14 for another possible intertext from this poem.

**Stanza 12.** ‘our moonlit, immortal wheat’ refers to Walcott’s poem ‘Orient and Immortal Wheat’, the epigraph to which is from Traherne’s *Centuries of Meditation*: ‘The Corn was Orient and Immortal Wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from Everlasting to Everlasting.’<sup>20 21</sup>

Traherne would have appealed to Walcott not least for his love of the natural world and his almost pantheistic verse, but also for sentiments such as, ‘By this you may see who are the Rude and Barbarous Indians: For verily there is no Savage Nation under the Cope of Heaven, that is more absurdly Barbarous than the Christian World. They that go Naked and Drink Water and live upon Roots are like Adam, or Angels in Comparison of us.’<sup>22</sup>

‘the pillars on Salisbury Plain’ are the vertical monoliths of the Stonehenge stone circle, set up as a lunar and then solar temple more than three thousand years ago.

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<sup>18</sup> Judith Bronkhurst, *William Holman Hunt, A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 3 and 162

<sup>19</sup> Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, p. 772.

<sup>20</sup> Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems*, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditation: The Third Century, Section 3* in *Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings* ed. Anne Ridler (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press), pp. 264.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditation: The Third Century, Section 12*, pp. 269-70.

**Stanza 13.** ‘Dark future down darker street’ is ambiguous. It could be read as pessimistic, but only if ‘dark’ is seen as a negative (!) adjective. It could also be read as claiming the future for the black peoples.

***Chapter XXXIX.***

Walcott visits Maud Plunkett’s home in Ireland and reflects on the Troubles and their old roots. Later, in Dublin, he sees Joyce, ‘our age’s Omeros, undimmed Master’.

***Chapter XXXIX, Section i.***

**Stanza 1.** ‘The great headstones’ at Glendalough are generally in the local mica schist, difficult to work in fine detail due to its flaking structure, and are ‘some of the largest in Ireland.’<sup>23</sup>

‘curraghs’ are skin-covered, wooden-framed boats used mainly on the west coast of Ireland.

**Stanza 4.** ‘wafers’ alludes to the bread of the Sacrament and ‘station’ to the Stations of the Cross and to the pilgrims’ stations at Glendalough. ‘missal’ and ‘Latin’ also continue the imagery of Catholic worship.

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Cochrane, *National Monuments, Ireland: Historical and Descriptive Notes of the Ecclesiastical Remains at Glendalough* (Dublin: Baile Atha Cliath, 1911-2, rev 1925), p. 31.

**Stanzas 8 and 10.** Glen-da-Lough means ‘Valley of the Two Lakes’. Walcott will surely know this and his vagueness about its meaning is puzzling, unless he is joking. The ‘obelisk’ is the Round Tower.<sup>24</sup>

**Stanza 11.** ‘alder and aspen aged in one alphabet’ refers to the Ogham script and its corresponding tree alphabet, the Beth-Luis-Nion (Birch-Rowan-Ash). Characters in this Old Irish script were assigned the names of trees which began with the appropriate character. Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* saw mythological associations in the alphabet.<sup>25</sup>

Walcott may have seen additional relevance to *Omeros* in that most inscriptions in Ogham are personal names and the preservation of names is a theme of the poem. It is also likely that ‘alder’ means the European or Black Alder and ‘aspen’ the White Poplar, making this a statement about black and white living together as equals.

**Stanzas 11-16.** Walcott refers to the long-standing hatred between Catholic and Protestant in Ireland, still going on in Ulster in the north. ‘dividing a Shem from a Shaun’ is a borrowing from Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, where these two characters represent opposite traits of their father.<sup>26</sup>

***Chapter XXXIX, Section ii.***

**Stanzas 1-3.** Walcott sees hatred at sunset, ingrained in the stones themselves. Religion is the cause (‘pitted’ ‘meaning marked by black pits’ but also ‘pitted

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Cochrane, *Glendaloughi*, pp. 3. and 11-12.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, pp. 36-43 and 165-204.

<sup>26</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, pp. 113-4.



against'). The cloud is the colour of King Billy, William of Orange, whose defeat of James II and conquest of all Ireland began the centuries-old conflict. The cypress, symbolic of death, darkens, then the taller Round Tower. Night rules.

**Stanza 2.** 'Sugar Loaf' is a hill near Glen-da-Lough.<sup>27</sup>

*Chapter XXXIX, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 1-10.** The Dublin of James Joyce is evoked. The Joycean references are many: 'bloomed' (from Leopold Bloom, whose odyssey through Dublin is the subject of *Ulysses*), 'eye-patch and tilted hat,/rakish cane' (from the iconic photos of Joyce), 'Anna Livia' (Anna Livia Plurabelle, mother to Shem and Shaun in *Finnegan's Wake*), 'The Dead' (title of a short story in *The Dubliners*), 'wick-low' (Wicklow, the county adjacent to Dublin and home of Glendalough), 'Howth' (Howth Head on Dublin Bay, appearing in *Ulysses*, *the Dubliners* and *Finnegan's Wake*), 'the Martello' (a defensive tower built by the British where Joyce lived for a few days, part of the setting for *Ulysses*), 'one-eyed Ulysses' (Joyce himself) etc.

**Stanza 1.** The Liffey is Dublin's river.

**Stanza 3.** 'our age's Omeros, undimmed Master/and true tenor of the place' places Joyce as heir to both Homer and Virgil, the latter because the reference to 'Master' echoes Dante's word to Virgil in Canto I line 85 of the *Inferno*, 'tu se' lo mio maestro e'l mio autore'.

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<sup>27</sup> <<http://www.glendalough.ie/>>

**Stanza 4.** ‘flaneur’ is an idler or loafer.<sup>28</sup>

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*Chapter XL.*

Europe has been found wanting. The Narrator now imagines Odysseus and his crew seeking home. The scene shifts to the Caribbean and back to the Mediterranean as Walcott reflects on the relationship between power, art and reality. This chapter, which goes back to Greece, the starting point of the Homeric myth, is pivotal to the poem and therefore opens with images of stasis. From now on, the story lines start to wind down. As Odysseus turns for home, Walcott begins to deconstruct the positions Plunkett and the Narrator had adopted over Helen.

*Chapter XL, Section i.*

**Stanza 1.** ‘the mail-packet’ is a linking device to the previous chapter. It also appears in *Another Life* as *The Jewel*, its reliability seen by Baugh and Nepaulsingh as the opposite of unfaithfulness.<sup>29</sup> Here it is bound to one island, ‘a snail’, ‘becalmed’, and is the spiritual opposite of the sea-swift that travels oceans. Many other images of stasis follow, before the beat of the boatswain’s mattock begins again (XL/ii/6).

**Stanza 2.** ‘Storks crest the columns’ refers to the habit of nesting storks of building on the tops of columns, chimneys etc.

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<sup>28</sup> Patrick Hanks (editor), *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh, *Derek Walcott: Another Life, fully annotated*, lines 746 and 718 and annotations p. 251.

**Stanzas 5-8.** Odysseus does not know where to go. He hears siren voices, ‘the hill music’ (maybe Julie Andrews’ ‘the hills are alive with the sound of music’).

‘wormholes’ refers to wood worm, but also the theoretical physics of space-time, where a ‘wormhole’ could allow time travel. This reference is in keeping with XL/iii/7, for *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* was described by Duchamp as comparable to a 4<sup>th</sup> dimensional projection into a 3-dimensional world.<sup>30</sup>

***Chapter XL, Section ii.***

**Stanzas 2-4.** Turning back ‘towards the dream of Helen’ is ‘the wrong way’. So too is Circe’s island, where they lost themselves in pleasure. Walcott, ‘the cloud-eyed singer’, rejects his romantic view of Helen and the classical metaphors.

**Stanza 6.** ‘Island after island passing. Still we ain’t home.’” The four successive trochees up to the caesura convey the monotony of the voyage and set up the ‘Still’ as more emphatic.

**Stanzas 7-9.** The ‘sea-swift’ leads Odysseus, the breeze lifts the sails and the ship heads back for the Caribbean, home.

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<sup>30</sup> Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* tr. Ron Padgett (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), pp. 39-40.

**Stanza 12.** ‘Andros’ is both the largest island in the Bahamas and an island in the Cyclades. It ties Walcott’s short Greek sojourn to the Caribbean, as does the last line of this section, ‘weeping for palms or olive trees’.

The ‘Caribbean currents’ will therefore take the unwary sailor through the whole arc of islands from the northern Caribbean to Margarita and Curaçao off the northern coast of Venezuela.

*Chapter XL, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 3-4.** Walcott declares his preference for Nature over Civic Art. ‘the terror of Time’ is that he will lose his soul in a twilight love of ancient places that are not his home.

**Stanza 4.** Walcott refers obliquely to the Bridge of Sighs, the name for the Venetian bridge linking the Doge’s palace, where criminals were questioned, to the prisons. Byron popularised the name when he included it in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*:

I stood in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs;

A palace and a prison on each hand:<sup>31</sup>

**Stanzas 6-7.** ‘The cracked glass’ that is a feature of Duchamp’s Dadaist construction was an accident he liked and decided to keep.<sup>32</sup> Hamner notes that Walcott himself

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Byron: *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron* (London: Henry Frowde/Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 221.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), pp. 52-6.

delighted in errors that reveal insights of their own.<sup>33</sup> He may also have enjoyed the punning nature of the title, which Marquis suggests alludes to Duchamp's passion for his sister Suzanne, just married; *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (the bride stripped bare by her bachelors, even) can be read with the final word as *m'aime* (the bride stripped bare by her bachelors loves me).<sup>34</sup>

He may have chosen Duchamp's work here because Dada resists critical analysis and seems to anticipate the disorder of the Second World War.

Paul Celan (Romanian) and Max Jacob (French) were Jewish Surrealist poets who were both deported by Nazi Germany. Dadaism was anti-war and anarchistic. In this reference and the others concerning art in this section, Walcott denies the power of Art to redeem the cruelty of regimes and seems to question its relevance.

**Stanza 10.** 'some Caesar's eaten nose' could refer to an eroded bust, but in the context is more likely to be an allusion to syphilis and hence degeneracy.

**Stanza 11.** Walcott finishes his attack on European art. In the first half of the poem he showed Art as surrendering to History (XXXVI/i/2), here he blames it for acting as apologist or camouflage for power. It is irrelevant to the experience of slavery.

### *Chapter XLI.*

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<sup>33</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's Omeros*, p. 120.

<sup>34</sup> Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Marcel Duchamp: Eros, c'est la vie. a Biography* (Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing, 1981), p. 78

Walcott/the Narrator returns to the USA, seeing the falseness of the civilised facades, not just in the South that would wish away the blacks as it had legislated away the Indians. He reflects on the displacement of the Indians by the English and that the Revolution had changed nothing. The churches of New England were repressive. Education and privilege did not make Walcott any more free.

*Chapter XLI, Section i.*

**Stanza 1.** ‘Service. Under my new empire’ Walcott speaks of his teaching in Boston, using the same term that Plunkett used in XIX/i/16 for the midshipmen and his comrades-in-arms in North Africa. Significantly, Plunkett stressed that service was their motivation, not honour.

**Stanzas 1-3.** Walcott equates himself with the Greek slaves used as tutors by the Romans, and the USA with the Roman empire, crass, interested only in wealth.

**Stanza 6.** ‘*fascēs*’ were the bundles of rods around an axe that symbolised the authority of magistrates in Ancient Rome. They were adopted as symbols for the doctrine of the state before the individual that grew into fascism. They also appear on the Lincoln Memorial and the 1932 US 25 cent coin.<sup>35</sup>

‘A wedding-cake Republic’ allows several interpretations. It may be visually like a wedding cake, white with ornate porticos and pillars. It may be superficial, its true

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<sup>35</sup> Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 4.

nature hidden under an icing of civilisation. It may be tiered, with strong social divisions between the slaves at the bottom and the ranks of plantation owners above.

**Stanza 8.** ‘Solon’ was an Athenian statesman and law-maker. The Indians reference alludes to Andrew Jackson, who as President implemented the Indian Removal Act of 1830 enforcing the removal of the Indians to the lands west of the Mississippi (see note to XXXV/i/1).

*Chapter XLI, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 1- 9.** Walcott equates men and trees. As trees take on the character of where they are seeded, so do men. They are not chess pieces to be moved at will. Though the mind can acquire other hues, to be moved means losing your culture, your soul. Caesar understood exile as a means of control.

**Stanza 10.** Walcott shares the white guilt, just as he shared the black guilt of trading in slaves.

‘the Shawmut’ is the promontory on which Boston is built.

**Stanzas 10-15.** Walcott parallels his Caribbean tale and the history of New England. The ‘stain on a map’ refers to English redcoat soldiers, the blood they shed and the colour by which the British Empire was traditionally coloured on maps.

**Stanzas 11 and 13.** Concord was the starting point of the American Revolutionary War against English rule (see note to XVI/iii/4). The ‘shot heard round the world’ is from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Concord Hymn*:

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,  
  
Their flag to April’s breeze unfurled  
  
Here once the embattled farmers stood  
  
And fired the shot heard round the world.

**Stanza 12.** ‘shakos’ are the tall hats of the soldiers, worn from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>36</sup>

**Stanza 15.** The ‘insane/cloud’ is George III (see Stanza 12).

*Chapter XLI, Section iii.*

**Stanza 3.** ‘George’s shilling’ is ‘the King’s shilling’, paid to British soldiers and sailors each day, and given to new recruits who were said to ‘take the King’s shilling’.

**Stanza 6.** ‘the whalehouse’ could be taken to mean the simple houses used by whalers in Massachusetts but is more likely to mean the beamed church interior.

**Stanza 7.** ‘the mouse claw of ivy’ Eight old-established colleges of New England (Yale, Harvard, Brown etc) are collectively known as the Ivy League.

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<sup>36</sup> <<http://44th.webs.com/uniform.html>> [accessed 19Nov 2010].



**Stanza 8.** The ‘Transcendentals’ were a syncretic 19<sup>th</sup> century New England group who believed in the essential unity of creation, the innate goodness of man and an ideal spiritual state that "transcends" the physical and empirical, realized only through the individual's intuition, rather than through the doctrines of established religions (this last very close to Walcott's views expressed in his first public poem – see note to IV/i/10-11 above).<sup>37</sup> Thoreau (an Abolitionist and believer in the moral responsibility of citizens for their government's actions) and Emerson (a champion of individualism and self-reliance) were prominent in the movement.

‘sifting wit from the chaff, the thorn out of Thoreau,/ the mess from Emerson’ may allude to the internal contradictions in a group of beliefs borrowed from a range of philosophies, literatures and religions.

**Stanzas 12-13.** ‘The river/had been crossed’ refers to the emancipation of slaves, crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land (Numbers 33:51-53), Walcott pointing out that despite this, blacks do not have the same freedom as whites. The final line links back to the first stanza of the chapter. The ‘special skill’ is Walcott's ability to teach under his ‘new empire’, and refers to the US Immigration Service guidelines for those seeking a Green Card work permit under Category ‘EB4. Special Immigrants. Special skills and professionals.’<sup>38</sup>

## ***Chapter XLII.***

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<sup>37</sup> Joel Myerson (editor), *Transcendentalism: a Reader* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. xxv-xxxv.

<sup>38</sup> <<http://www.us-immigration.com/blog/tag/green-card>> [accessed 19 Nov 2010].

Walcott sees in a young Polish waitress in Toronto another wave of migrants, those who resisted totalitarian oppression. Winter reminds him of Catherine Weldon and he takes up her story again.

*Chapter XLII, Section i.*

**Stanzas 1-16.** This section probably got its inspiration during Walcott's trip to Toronto in October 1988 for the International Festival of Authors.<sup>39</sup> It illustrates how Walcott sees connections everywhere, in the most mundane of circumstances. He moves from the immigrant waitress who serves him to the Poland she left (this was in the middle of Solidarity's struggle with the government and two years before semi-free elections). From there he moves to Polish poets who resisted Communism, 'that other servitude' that was also a form of slavery.

**Stanza 8.** 'that pitiless fiction' refers to the idea that North America can offer opportunity and above all freedom.

**Stanzas 13-16.** Walcott steps aside from the business of the day to reflect on the ideas triggered by meeting the waitress. The Polish poets he celebrates, Adam Zagajewski, Zbigniew Herbert and Czeslaw Milosz, were prominent in the literary resistance to Communism, all of them spending some of their lives in exile. Walcott was close friends with the Russian Joseph Brodsky, another poet-in-exile, and seems to empathise particularly with their situation.

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<sup>39</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 481.

*Chapter XLII, Section ii.*

**Stanza 3.** Back in Boston, Walcott is reminded of Catherine Weldon.

*Chapter XLII, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 2-3.** The ‘army blanket’ and ‘carrying its own death inside it’ may refer to the supposed distribution from the riverboat *St Peters* of US Army hospital blankets infected with smallpox to the Plains Indians, deliberately starting a pandemic in 1837.

This story has a long provenance. Tales of deliberate infection of native American populations vulnerable to European diseases go back to Cortes and the Aztecs and to the commander of Fort Pitt, besieged by the Delawares in 1763. No documented evidence has been found for the 1837 charge and accidental infection was likely from known cases on the boat. Such conspiracy theories seem unnecessary, when so many documented cases of deaths from neglect, ill-treatment and massacre of the Native Americans exist.

*Chapter XLIII.*

Catherine Weldon at the Parkin Farm remembers her childhood toy, a snow-globe, and imagines all of the Ghost Dance history within it. She visits the deserted village of the slaughtered Indians, which echoes exactly the African village where the slaves were captured. The Narrator takes up her story and tells her it is over, she has

survived. but she dreads winters. Back in his own Boston winter, the Narrator seeks the flat of his Greek lover, Antigone, but cannot find it.

*Chapter XLIII, Section i.*

**Stanza 1.** The flour is seen both as snow and as symbolic of the flour doled out to keep the Indians subdued on reservations, but on starvation rations.<sup>40</sup>

**Stanza 2.** Catherine Weldon was from Brooklyn, NY not Brookline, Boston. The Boston references here and later seem to be Walcott refashioning Weldon's life to suit his story, as in other details such as the Parkin Farm and her husband.

The snow globe is a link between childhood and adulthood, as it was in *Citizen Kane*, but it contains no people. It represents loss of innocence, and, for the continent, the loss of its pre-Columbian purity and the extermination of its peoples.

**Stanza 9.** The ironic reference is to the U.S. anthem *The Star Spangled Banner* and its lines, 'And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave/O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.'

**Stanzas 9-17.** Weldon imagines an Indian attack on a fort (the chalet in the globe) that ends with their deaths.

*Chapter XLIII, Section ii.*

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<sup>40</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 271.

**Stanzas 1-5.** This passage is a direct echo of XXVII/ii/1-5, where Achilles sees a chain of men and finds in the deserted village a child and a fanged mongrel, then sees Seven Seas and thinks him deaf as well as blind because his head never turned. Walcott is pointing to the parallel between the wiping out of the Indians and the abduction of the Africans.

**Stanza 5.** ‘Omeros’ is the shaman Seven Seas had claimed to have been in XXXI/iii/3, conflating all three characters.

**Stanza 7.** ‘a broken arrow’ in Indian symbolism means ‘Peace.’<sup>41</sup>

**Stanza 11.** ‘I walked like a Helen among their dead warriors.’ Merging the final two syllables of ‘warriors’, the line scans as four amphibrachs, the classical form highlighting the tragedy and the Trojan metaphor.

The image of the horse recalls Brodsky’s ‘the horses, inflated casks/of ribs’.<sup>42</sup>

***Chapter XLIII, Section iii.***

**Stanzas 1-2.** Catherine is back at her fireside in Boston, where she imagined the preceding episode. History repeats itself. She is at the mercy of Destiny, ordained in advance.

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<sup>41</sup> <<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/articles/article/USA/Native-American-Sacred-Symbols--/2267>> [accessed 11 April 2010].

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, p. 8.

**Stanza 3.** By pointing out that shared suffering gave the separate tribes of North American Indians a sense of nationhood, Walcott promotes a similar understanding among the Caribbean peoples of all origins.

**Stanza 7.** ‘the cracked/window spread its webs’ refers back to Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even*, but here is the frost spreading its patterns. It is also a recasting of Tennyson’s *Lady of Shalott*, ‘Out flew the web and floated wide;/The mirror cracked from side to side’<sup>43</sup>

**Stanza 11.** The Narrator takes up the story from Catherine.

**Stanzas 18-19.** ‘The name I had mispronounced’ is ‘Omeros’ (II/iii/1). Walcott is led to make a last attempt to find Antigone.

**Stanza 25.** ‘I had lost the address’. Walcott finds his Greek metaphor can no longer satisfy him.

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<sup>43</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Poetical Works* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, undated), p. 52.

***Book 6.***

Book 6 is about healing. Hector crashes the Comet and is killed, thereby ‘curing’ himself of his desperate attempt to buy Helen’s love. Walcott returns to St Lucia and realises he has a vested interest in the place not changing. Achille and Helen mourn Hector. Ma Kilman treks into the forest for the African cure for Philoctete’s sore and bathes him, healing the sore. Walcott too begins to heal of his wrong, classical vision of Helen and the island. Maud Plunkett dies and Plunkett is joined by the townsfolk at her funeral. Helen returns to Achille. At the end of the year, Achille and Philoctete act out the old African ritual dance and find release.

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***Chapter XLIV.***

Walcott comes back to Trinidad in an ecstasy of nostalgia and experiences a synaesthesia in which all his senses open to the islands and his perceptions become mixed.

***Chapter XLIV, Section i.***

**Stanza 1.** ‘from San Fernando to Mayagüez’ covers the whole arc of the Antilles, from the south west coast of Trinidad to the west coast of Puerto Rico. ‘the same sunrise’ implies a shared destiny, which Walcott would have preferred to be realised as the West Indies Federation, though that political experiment only lasted from 1958-

62.<sup>1</sup> Walcott wrote *Drums and Colours*, the pageant that accompanied the opening of the first West Indies Federal Parliament, and after the Federation collapsed decried small-island nationalism.<sup>2</sup> He wrote of the small-island problem in 'The Schooner *Flight*', too small for 'progress', yet 'Progress is History's dirty joke'.<sup>3</sup>

**Stanza 3.** 'the Indian diaspora' are the descendants of the Indian indentured labourers who began to come over from 1845 to replace the labour of the freed slaves (see note to XXIX/iii/10-16).

**Stanza 4.** 'the savannah' is the Queens Park parkland and racecourse in Port of Spain. Walcott lived in Trinidad for a long time, but this memory may date from a later visit. King says, 'then he and Norline moved to the colonial Queen's Park Hotel in Port of Spain for part of April [1980]. Walcott liked the hotel for its older ways and has made paintings of the horses on the Savannah across from it.'<sup>4</sup> Examples of those paintings illustrate *Tiepolo's Hound*.<sup>5</sup>

**Chapter XLIV, Section ii.**

**Stanzas 1 to 6.** These stanzas and the whole of section iii convey the way senses are heightened following a tropical shower.

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Rogoziński, *A Brief History of the Caribbean*, pp. 310 and 321.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, pp. 136 and 187.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Star Apple Kingdom* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 391.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Walcott, *Tiepolo's Hound* (London, Faber and Faber, 2000), pp. 8 and 128.



**Stanza 5.** ‘the Morris chair’ is an adjustable armchair or reclining chair. Named after William Morris, the chairs are made in a variety of similar styles, with hinged back and detachable cushions.

*Chapter XLIV, Section iii.*

**Stanza 1.** ‘twin-headed January’ Janus, the god of January, looks both ways, into the past and the future. See Critical Introduction: Dualism for a discussion of Walcott’s ability to see both sides of a question.

‘they assured us’ implies that Walcott did not entirely agree with the statement about the past and degradation. This is capable of several interpretations. Most likely is that he is disagreeing that the degradation is past, saying that it still exists, is still present to be contradicted by the wind in Stanza 2.

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*Chapter XLV.*

Hector is killed by his reckless driving on the road on the west of the island. Walcott reflects on his own love for picturesque and simple poverty, rather than modernity and ‘progress’. St Lucia is changing. He has a cinematic vision of Hector’s death.

*Chapter XLV, Section i.*

**Stanzas 2-3.** ‘Dennergy’, St Lucia and ‘Dakar’, Senegal lie within one degree of latitude of one another, on opposite sides of the Atlantic.

**Stanzas 3 and 17.** The repeated phrase ‘the uninterrupted wind’ encloses parenthetically the episode of Hector’s accident and death. This device raises a number of points on Walcott’s method and message. He admired Dante’s ability, with parenthesis, to concentrate the action.<sup>6</sup> Here he does the same, using the interruption itself to carry the main story forward. However, this can also be read that Hector and his doings are not the main story, which is that of the island and the elements, rather like the last line in the poem, where it is the sea that is ‘still going on’. His use of the adjective ‘uninterrupted’ is both correct (the wind is not interrupted) and contradictory (the text about Hector is an interruption), a playful touch.

**Stanza 6.** ‘zouk’ is a music style that originated in the French West Indies and developed in the 1980’s as a blend of Calypso and Cadence (see note to XXI/i/2). In St Lucia, while calypso lyrics have retained political overtones, dealing with social issues, zouk lyrics generally do not and are seen only as exhilarating entertainment.<sup>7</sup>

**Stanza 10.** ‘Madonna/of the Rocks’ alludes to Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of 1483. The allusion is unclear, as Leonardo’s Madonna wears no hood so is not a model for the statuette and the full title applies only to the painting, not a statue.

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<sup>6</sup> Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and the Impress of Dante* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 190-191 and 277.

<sup>7</sup> Jocelyne Guilbault (author and editor), *Zouk: World Music in the West Indies*, pp. 192-3.

The painting shows the Archangel Gabriel pointing to the infant John the Baptist where he and the infant Jesus play around the Madonna's lap.

**Stanza 15.** 'The fated crescent' refers to the course of the comet towards the sun, but also alludes to the crescent moon associated with the Madonna as a symbol of chastity.<sup>8</sup>

**Stanza 16.** There are many cases of statues of the Madonna being thought to weep. It is an iconography that Walcott's Methodist faith would have found problematic, but here it is a poetic miracle.

**Stanza 17.** Hector has the national flag on his radio aerial. The island's flag was designed by Walcott's friend Dunstan St Omer and shows two stylised pitons that symbolise the white and black cultures, plus a triangle of golden sunshine and prosperity, all on a sea blue that symbolises fidelity. Hector gained no prosperity and ultimately died trying to ensure Helen's fidelity. The mention of the flag may therefore be ironic.<sup>9</sup>

*Chapter XLV, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 3-5.** Walcott enters his own story and is told what has happened to Hector, a character he has created. This is subtly reminding the reader of the writing process and attempting to conceal the fiction. Walcott again has it both ways.

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<sup>8</sup> <<http://www.oldandsold.com/articles22/madonna-2.shtml>> [accessed 11 Feb 2011].

<sup>9</sup> *Complete Flags of the World* (London, New York, Munich, Melbourne, Delhi: Dorling Kindersley, 1997), p. 38.

**Stanzas 20-22.** Catching something of the tone of Froude's notorious verdict on the West Indies ('The natural graces of life do not show themselves under such conditions [...] There are no people there in the true sense of the word, with a character and purpose of their own.'<sup>10</sup>), Walcott ironises the tourists' attitude on leaving St Lucia, appropriately enough as Froude was himself condemned as a Cook's tourist within a year of his book's publication.<sup>11</sup>

*Chapter XLV, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 6-10.** Hector's accident is presented as a film's editing script, in a genre-shift. The successive images recall Hector's speed and his seat covers, the horse on the beach (VI/iii/1) and Hector's riderless horse at Troy, Catherine Weldon and Helen grieving, Hector's chariot and Comet, Hector's anger and its cause, Walcott's Greek lover and the conch that welcomes fishermen home, Hector's fallen shield and hubcap.

Walcott mentioned that he had been working on film scripts as well and when asked about his jump cutting between times and places said, 'That kind of editing keeps the story going, because about four or five of them going at the same time help the propulsion of the narrative...It's the same technique as film, right?'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James Anthony Froude, *The English in the West Indies*, p. 306.

<sup>11</sup> N. Darnell Davis, *Mr. Froude's Negrophobia*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Rebekah Presson 1992, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 190-191.

**Stanza 7.** The ‘Serengeti’ is a national game park in Kenya, a frequent location of wild-life filming. It is well-known in particular for the migrations of zebra and wildebeest.<sup>13</sup>

**Stanza 10.** ‘A horse nosing the surf’ alludes to Hector’s epithet at the end of Homer’s *The Iliad* Book 24, ‘Tamer of horses’.<sup>14</sup>

**Stanza 18.** ‘whip off his shirt, hearing the conch’s summoning note’ scans as three choriambes, the classical form emphasising the significance to Hector of his calling as a fisherman.

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### ***Chapter XLVI.***

Hector is buried and Achille marks his funeral rites by celebrating him as a fisherman. He takes up Hector’s bailing tin with Helen’s permission. Helen grieves and the rites of life in the village go on unchanged. The ancestor spirits still suffer with Philoctete.

### ***Chapter XLVI, Section i.***

**Stanza 4.** Graves in the island and on many other West Indian islands are marked with conch shells.

**Stanzas 7 and 13.** ‘red tin’ see note to III/i/3.

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<sup>13</sup> <<http://www.serengeti.org/>> [accessed 20 Nov 2010].

<sup>14</sup> Martin Hammond (translator), *The Iliad*, p. 408.

*Chapter XLVI, Section ii.*

**Stanza 3.** Walcott uses the rarer pronunciation of ‘condolence’ as a dactyl.

*Chapter XLVI, Section iii.*

**Stanza 8.** The plantains come to life as a rustling chorus of ancestors, perhaps those who were thrown overboard on the Middle Passage. The ‘powers’ they have are as ‘jumbies’, vexing spirits of the dead who were not properly laid to rest.<sup>15</sup> They bring Philoctete to the forefront of the story again, preparatory to his healing.

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*Chapter XLVII.*

Ma Kilman goes to Mass, then remembers Philoctete and tries to think how to cure him. She follows the scent of an unknown plant into the forest, a plant brought from Africa as a seed in the swift’s stomach.

*Chapter XLVII, Section i.*

**Stanzas 1-15.** Ma Kilman’s herbal is a relatively short one. African traditional healing used many herbs and transported slaves had to find new treatments among the unfamiliar plants of the Caribbean.

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<sup>15</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies*, p. 179.

**Stanza 10.** The ‘anthurium’ has a red, heart-shaped flower with the spathe protruding, like a nail piercing it.

**Stanza 13.** Ma Kilman must undergo a trial on her quest for the cure (see also XLVII/iii/9).

**Stanza 15.** ‘old-talk’ means to chatter or gossip.<sup>16</sup>

*Chapter XLVII, Section ii.*

**Stanza 1.** The leaves of the yam (*Dioscorea alata*) have white ribs radiating from the stem. The ‘awning’ and ‘palanquin’ images will have occurred to Walcott because of the West Indian name of ‘elephant ear’ for the yam, from the shape of its leaf.<sup>17</sup>

**Stanza 4.** There are many precedents for a flower that has a repulsive smell. The so-called carrion flowers such as *Rafflesia arnoldii* or the Titan Arum *Amorphophallus* give off the scent of rotting flesh to attract carrion insects for pollination. The idea that Philoctete’s stinking wound can only be cured by a flower that stinks and is shaped like the anchor that wounded him, like-curing-like, is an old folk-belief that has echoes in homeopathy, a term which means exactly that.

**Stanza 9.** Ma Kilman’s ordeal continues, upwards, ‘passing the cactus, the thorn trees’ (see also XLVII/i/13).

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Alsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English*.

<sup>17</sup> Centre for Aquatic and Invasive Plants, University of Florida <<http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/>> [accessed 6 February 2010]

*Chapter XLVII, Section iii.*

**Stanza 8.** Walcott compounds meanings: ‘ants’ refers to the ants Ma Kilman saw (XLVII/ii/11) and to the myrmidons, the ‘ant-people’ of Achilles’ tribe, and the collier women climbing into the ship, their ‘line crossing like ants’ (XIII/ii/16).

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*Chapter XLVIII.*

Walcott/the Narrator reflects on the failure of his relationships and begins to come to terms with that. Ma Kilman goes into an ecstatic trance and prepares to cure Philoctete of his self-hatred and his sore. Ma Kilman is seen as one in a long line of sibyls, obeah women.

*Chapter XLVIII, Section i.*

**Stanza 6.** ‘the male,/like the dung beetle storing up its dry feces’ reflects the depth of self-loathing Walcott sometimes felt. His craft, spoken of lyrically later (LXIV), produces only ‘dry feces’. This self-imprecation should not be taken entirely at face value. Walcott is capable of seeing both the element of aridity in any intellectual activity and the value to himself and others of the craft he follows.

**Stanza 10.** ‘sons’ here means offspring. Walcott has one son and two daughters.



**Stanza 11.** '*per mea culpa*' is a misquotation from the Roman Catholic Mass, the *Confiteor*, in which the priest says, '*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*' ('through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault'). Walcott's 'per', though it means 'through', is not needed.<sup>18</sup>

**Stanzas 12-15.** Walcott speaks of his love for his craft, the love that had broken his marriages and taken him from his children. His habit of rising before dawn to work was commented on by King.<sup>19</sup>

**Stanza 13.** 'it had made me blind', to others' needs, perhaps, but also putting him on a par with Homer's blindness.

**Stanza 15.** Any suggestion in the pun on 'hollow' that Walcott considered his craft unworthy can only be due to the depression that colours the whole of this section.

**Stanza 20.** 'that golden host' are the marigolds.

The 'gods in the leaves' who have 'lost their names' are the old African ones. Their names being forgotten deprives them of 'considerable presence', a fate that elsewhere in the poem befalls Achille (XXV/iii/19-20) and Philoctete (III/iii/6-8).

**Stanzas 23-4.** Ma Kilman carries race memories of the African gods. Erzulie is the voodoo goddess of love and beauty.<sup>20</sup> Shango is the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning. Ogun is the Yoruba warrior god of iron and fire, patron of smiths.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> <[http://www.angelqueen.org/mass/p\\_02\\_mea\\_culpa.shtml](http://www.angelqueen.org/mass/p_02_mea_culpa.shtml)> [accessed 13 Feb 2011]

<sup>19</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 495.

*Chapter XLVIII, Section ii.*

**Stanza 1.** ‘the caverned prophetess’ Ma Kilman’s cavern is the ‘dark wood’ but the adjective puts her in the company of the oracles of Greece, particularly the Sibyl of Cumae (see XLVIII/iii/4).

**Stanza 10.** ‘the white line/of breakers’ is one of Walcott’s hundreds of puns in the book (see Critical Introduction: Metaphor) and refers to slave overseers, breakers of men.

*Chapter XLVIII, Section iii.*

**Stanza 2.** ‘There was no difference/between me and Philoctete.’ Walcott and Philoctete share the same wound and as Philoctete needs to be cured of his yearning for the language of Africa, Walcott needs to be cured of his for classical metaphor. This similarity/dichotomy mirrors the literary tension between Walcott and Edward Kamau Brathwaite, the former loving the English corpus, the latter seeking a nation-language, both wishing to write relevantly to the Caribbean. In his study of the development of a Caribbean literary language that is ‘nation-language’, Brathwaite quotes approvingly from some of Walcott’s work and the two are not as distanced on the spectrum as has sometimes been thought.<sup>22</sup> (See also Critical Introduction: Dialects.)

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<sup>20</sup> Michel S. Laguerre, *Voodoo Heritage* (Beverly Hills, London: Sage, 1980) p. 71.

<sup>21</sup> William Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, pp. 82-84.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), pp. 41-2 and 49.

As Breslin writes, ‘The problem for Walcott was to accept literary apprenticeship [to English literary masters] without experiencing it as an extension of colonial oppression. Imitation had to be disentangled from the familiar disparagement of colonial culture as mimicry of a metropolitan original.’<sup>23</sup> Walcott has moved beyond such concerns deliberately and explicitly in *Omeros*, by rejecting the classical in favour of the local metaphor, giving dominance to social rather than literary inheritance and developing a new cross-cultural poetics in which the classical is simply one reference point. As Thieme says, Walcott’s influences operate ‘along a discursive continuum which elides the boundaries between high art and popular culture [...]’.<sup>24</sup> It is Walcott’s attempt to create cultural order out of a variety of sources that leads Pollard to link him with Eliot and Brathwaite as generally ‘modern’, though with ‘post-modern’ elements to his work.<sup>25</sup>

**Stanza 5.** Now that Ma Kilman has picked the flower and undergone her apotheosis, the flower smells sweet. This transformation prefigures the healing that Philoctete will undergo.

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### *Chapter XLIX.*

Ma Kilman bathes Philoctete in a brew cooked up in an old sugar cauldron she has symbolically cleansed. Philoctete is healed physically and spiritually and is reborn.

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Breslin, *Nobody’s Nation*, p. 48

<sup>24</sup> John Thieme, *Derek Walcott* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Charles W. Pollard, *New World Modernisms: T. S. Eliot, Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite*, (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004), p. 39.

Walcott too is cured of his sickness, that of seeing St Lucia through the veil of classical metaphor. He sees the island as it is.

*Chapter XLIX, Section i.*

**Stanzas 1-9.** Ritual bathing is a feature of Shango cult cures in Trinidad.

‘The man who has been sick is lifted and carried to a tub filled with water and other liquids, including red lavender, spirit of asefesa (asafoetida), seven spirits of vinegar, palm oil, spice oil, and all the bush you can get (cassava, green limes, dragon’s blood, coozamahoe, rockshen, lanebwah etc.).’<sup>26</sup>

Walcott dispenses with most of the ingredients, but keeps the lime leaves.

**Stanzas 3-4.** Ma Kilman’s cleaning of the cauldron symbolises the scouring away of the servitude that accompanied the sugar-plantations.

**Stanza 6.** The alliteration on ‘l’ in ‘lime leaves leeches to his wet/knuckled spine like islands that cling...’ causes the tongue to suit the action to the word, clinging to the front of the palate.

**Stanza 8.** There is a direct parallel with Dante’s *Purgatorio*, *Canto I*, where Virgil wets his hands with dew from the grass and wipes Dante’s tearful face, cleansing him of Hell’s foulness. At the same time, Philoctete accepts Ma Kilman’s treatment as a

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<sup>26</sup> George Eaton Simpson, *Religious Cults of the Caribbean: Trinidad, Jamaica and Haiti* (Rio Pedras: University of Puerto Rico, 1980), p. 67.

boy does his mother's. The process is reminiscent of baptism, the washing away of sin, forgiveness of the child and atonement in the scrubbing.

**Stanza 9.** 'the sea-egg' is the white-spined sea urchin, *Tripneustes ventricosus*.

There are locally important sea egg fisheries in many islands in the region, notably St. Lucia, Barbados and Martinique, where they are harvested for their edible roe. They are particularly vulnerable to overfishing because their habitat is mostly shallow, close to shore and easily accessible.<sup>27</sup>

*Chapter XLIX, Section ii.*

**Stanza 1.** 'the bow leapt back to the palm of the warrior' speaks of the empowering effect on Philoctete. His Greek namesake, Philoctetes, was famed as an archer and was keeper of the bow and arrows of Hercules, but exiled on account of his disgusting wound. His exile ended and his wound was cured when these weapons were needed to defeat Troy.

'The yoke of the wrong name lifted from his shoulders'. Philoctete's 'wrong' name, imposed through slavery, is both a symbol of oppression and the means of that suppression.

**Stanzas 3-4.** Like Achille, Philoctete makes his own reversal of the Middle Passage in Ma Kilman's cauldron. Like Achille, he finds release from the guilt and shame of

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<sup>27</sup> A. H. Smith and S. Koester, *A description of the sea urchin fishery in Laborie, St. Lucia*. (CANARI LWI Project Document no. 4. CANARI Technical Report no. 294:8, 2001) p. 1.

losing his language and name in the action of being a fisherman, of holding an oar.

Walcott is saying that identity lies in what you are and do, not what you are called.

**Stanza 8.** ‘the schoolboys’ cries/when he’d weep in the window for their tribal shame’ is an autobiographical reference to Walcott and his brother Roddy, ‘two pale children staring from their upstairs window, wanting to march with that ragged, barefooted crowd, but who could not because they were black and poor.’<sup>28</sup> The Walcotts were middle-class, and high-brown, not black.

**Stanza 10.** See note to LXIV/i/7.

**Stanza 11.** Philoctete is reborn as Adam, Walcott’s motif for the Caribbean situation, an Eden where all things are possible and where the new Man may discover things afresh. There is no History and therefore no shame from slavery.

*Chapter XLIX, Section iii.*

**Stanza 9.** ‘My braceleted Circe’ contains echoes of both Eliot’s Prufrock, ‘And I have known the arms already, known them all— /Arms that are braceleted and white and bare’<sup>29</sup> and Joyce’s Bloom, or rather Bello, ‘At night your wellcreamed braceleted hands will wear fortythreebutton gloves’<sup>30</sup>.

**Stanzas 10-11.** ‘her white pillared house’ speaks both of colonial architecture, a formal way of life cut off from the people, and of Western Art, a house of which the

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<sup>28</sup> Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Bodley Head, 1937), p. 511.

pillars, the main practitioners, are white. This is ‘the wrong height’, unlike Philoctete in his yam garden on the hill.

**Stanzas 11-17.** Walcott’s love (the ‘right love’ now – See Stanza 1) is one of earthy, down-to-earth images, seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary.

**Stanza 14.** ‘steered it like a bicycle rim’. Adults and children since classical times have bowled hoops for sport or play, propelling and steering them with a stick. In poor societies, an old bicycle wheel rim serves equally well. Pieter Bruegel painted hoop-rolling as part of *De Kinderspelen* (Children’s Games) in 1560.<sup>31</sup>

Helen’s baby is identified as Hector’s, as it needed to be if it was to represent the future of St Lucia. Achille is a worthy partner for Helen, but still too rooted in the old ways to cope with the challenges St Lucia faces. He will survive but will be marginalised by modern fishing methods (LX/i/8-15). Hector came to grief by embracing the new, but he tried to make progress work. Helen too will find a way of living with change (LXIV/ii/1).

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### *Chapter L.*

The Plunketts remember their last trip ‘home’ to England. Plunkett had missed his cat and found the sights alien. He saw an alternative self in the hotel’s doorman, heard

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<sup>31</sup> F. Grossmann, *Pieter Bruegel: The Paintings Complete Edition* (London: Phaidon, 1955), Plate 15.

patois in the rain-filled gutters, missed his noisy island market. Maud senses approaching death.

*Chapter L, Section i.*

**Stanza 3.** ‘The Rodney’, short for The Admiral Rodney, one of at least a dozen English pubs and hotels named in honour of the victor of The Battle of the Saints.

**Stanzas 4-5.** Plunkett’s pun on ‘Admiral/Rob-Me’ is doubly ironical, given his earlier recognition that Empire had never paid the bill to the poor blacks of the West Indies (V/iii/21-22).

**Stanza 5.** ‘garden-boxes’ are boxes planted with flowers standing on the ground or here hanging from railings, rather like window boxes.

**Stanza 7.** ‘the bombsites’ being built upon show this was Plunkett’s first trip back to London since soon after the Second World War.

*Chapter L, Section ii.*

**Stanza 8.** If ‘parkas’ were sufficiently common to mention, this suggests that the Plunketts had made their last trip around 1980. Cheap dark-blue or black parkas with their orange linings and fur-edged hoods were everywhere in Britain for about ten years, before fashion among the young moved on and they became a subject of ridicule. They did not come back into fashion for almost twenty years.



**Stanza 12.** The *News of the World* was an English Sunday newspaper, known for sensationalist exposés, particularly of sexual misconduct among the wealthy and the famous.

*Chapter L, Section iii.*

No notes.

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*Chapter LI.*

On their way to Mass, the Plunketts have a near accident with Hector's transport. Plunkett warns Hector about his driving. While Maud is at Mass, Plunkett wanders the harbour as the midshipman Plunkett had done in Holland over two hundred years before. The Plunketts return home happy but Maud does not garden and goes to lie down.

*Chapter LI, Section i.*

**Stanza 5.** 'honky' is a derogatory term used by blacks of a white man (see LI/ii/17).

**Stanza 6.** The American term 'sonofabitch' is out of place in Plunkett's mouth. He would be more likely to say 'bastard'. Walcott's ear lets him down for once, or perhaps Plunkett has overheard too many American tourists.

**Stanza 8.** ‘The dawn was coming up like thunder’ refers to the refrain of Kipling’s poem of military nostalgia *Mandalay*, ‘An’ the dawn comes up like thunder outer China ‘crost the Bay!’<sup>32</sup>

*Chapter LI, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 4-5.** The reference to water is followed by a stanza containing half a dozen ‘w’ words, the letter imitating the waves. This is a device used elsewhere (LXV/i/4-5 and LXIV/ii/15-16) and is an interesting parallel to Heaney’s *Seeing Things* (publ 1991) in which the title poem points out that the hieroglyph for the Nile is a double zigzag line.

The parallel with Heaney’s poem is strengthened by ‘balcony/uprights under which he passed rippling like water’. Heaney has the line, ‘the air we stood up to our eyes in wavered/like the zig-zag hieroglyph for life itself.’<sup>33</sup>

**Stanzas 10-13.** Plunkett’s favourite ship is a metaphor for himself.

**Stanza 14.** ‘crusting bread’ echoes Lowell, in ‘This Golden Summer’.<sup>34</sup> See also note to XXXVIII/iii/11 for another possible intertext from this poem.

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<sup>32</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *The Complete Verse* (London: Kyle Cathie, 1990), p. 337.

<sup>33</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, p. 772.

**Stanza 17.** There is light irony in ‘He honked’, given LI/i/5. There is unlikely to be more than this, though one speculative etymology for ‘*honky*’ is that white customers for whores in Harlem used to honk their horns to get them to join them in their cars.<sup>35</sup>

*Chapter LI, Section iii.*

**Stanza 8.** The Thomas Moore poem, *Bendemeer’s Stream*, is about memory (see X/i/14).

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*Chapter LII.*

Maud dies, and in Plunkett’s mourning, a tea-chest/caddy of memories records the passing of Empire. Walcott reveals that he modelled the Plunketts in part on his parents.

*Chapter LII, Section i.*

**Stanza 3.** Thomas Macaulay wrote *Lays of Ancient Rome* about the heroes of the Roman Republic, while Edward Gibbon wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

‘an empire’s bookends’ is therefore a triple pun: books that remain from the British empire, books that stand for the beginning and end of the Roman empire and,

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<sup>35</sup> *New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006) and  
<<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=honky>> [accessed 21 Dec 2010].

referring to Plunkett's empire, '*an empire's book (i.e. story) ends*'. This last meaning is taken up in the next three stanzas.

***Chapter LII, Section ii.***

**Stanzas 1-16.** The section is a domestic and political catalogue of Empire, contained in the memories hoarded away in a tea-chest, but also in Plunkett's mind. These are the things that formed him.

**Stanza 1.** 'black Knights'. Knighthoods were the traditional reward for senior 'native' office-holders in the superstructure of Empire.

**Stanza 2.** A Toby jug is a pottery tankard shaped like a person (often a caricature these days). The original was supposed to be a model of a heavy drinker, Toby Fillpot, and implies drunken joviality.

**Stanza 3.** T E Lawrence, 'Lawrence of Arabia', was a British liaison officer during the Arab Revolt 1916-18 and played a major role in the First World War in the Middle East. His adoption of Arab dress and publicity for his romantic exploits made him legendary.<sup>36</sup> It is interesting that as well as writing an account of the Arabian campaign and the autobiographical *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, he translated Homer's *Odyssey*.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Liddell Hart, '*T. E. Lawrence*': *In Arabia and After* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), p. 128 and plate opposite p. 140.

<sup>37</sup> T. E. Shaw (Col. T. E. Lawrence), *The Odyssey* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1992).

**Stanza 4.** Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, London, is flanked by four couchant lions.

**Stanza 5.** *Mimosa pudica*, 'touch-me-not', reacts to touch by folding its leaves.<sup>38</sup>

Breadfruit leaves are deeply notched into some 7-12 fingers.

**Stanza 7.** 'dacoit' is an Indian term for a robber or bandit, normally acting in a gang.

'apes on Gibraltar' are Barbary Macaques (called apes though strictly monkeys).

Legend has it that as long as the bands of apes remain on Gibraltar, the rock will remain British. Sir Winston Churchill ordered more to be imported when the population dwindled during the Second World War.<sup>39</sup>

'the yellowing teeth' recalls the 'skinned yellow teeth' of the warrior Achilles killed at XXVII/iii/11, but is more reflective of exploitation by white explorers, shooting elephants and using their tusks for piano keys.

**Stanza 9.** 'Mafeking' was a town in South Africa besieged by the Boers during the Second Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902. Mafeking was besieged from October 1899 to May 1900. The siege and its lifting by a relief column were the stuff of romantic and jingoistic journalism in Britain at the time.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A8571963>> [accessed 13 Feb 2011].

<sup>39</sup> <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gibraltar\\_Barbary\\_Macaques](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gibraltar_Barbary_Macaques)> [accessed 13Feb 2011].

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1979), pp. 396-415.

**Stanzas 9-10.** The British Major General Charles Gordon was killed by Mahdist rebels while besieged in Khartoum, Sudan in 1884. In 1885 George W Joy painted *Gordon's Last Stand*, a very popular picture showing rebels climbing steps to attack a defiant Gordon.

**Stanza 10.** Robert Clive was the politician and soldier who, in the service of the British East India Company, did much to ensure British rule in India. At Plassey in 1757, he defeated the Nawab of Bengal, largely by bribing the Nawab's commanders, and installed his own puppet ruler. He made himself a fortune but committed suicide after being required to defend his conduct during a Parliamentary enquiry.<sup>41</sup>

**Stanza 11.** Walcott adapts the Lord's Prayer. The British never doubted that their conquest of Empire had the active endorsement of God.

**Stanza 13.** 'the runnings' is the Caribbean term for what the English call 'the runs', diarrhoea brought on by food gone bad in the tropical heat.<sup>42</sup>

'the jordan' is the chamberpot. Shakespeare wrote, 'Why, they will allow us ne'er a jordan, and then we leak in your chimney;' in *King Henry IV, Part 1, Act 2* and has Sir John Falstaff say, 'Empty the jordan' in *King Henry IV, Part 2, Act 2*.

**Stanza 16.** The Royal Horse Guards wear a silver helmet with a red horsehair plume (not a feather).<sup>43</sup> This may be what Walcott had in mind, though 'heaume' is strictly

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<sup>41</sup> Percival Spear, *Master of Bengal: Clive and His India* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), pp. 81-101.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*.

an early mediaeval helmet reaching to the shoulders, not worn by British soldiers even ceremonially.

The second line is a series of six trochees, perhaps indicative of military precision, or perhaps another result of his close friendship with Heaney, who at about this time was writing, in *Seeing Things*, 'Sunlight, turfsmoke, seagulls, boatslip, diesel'.<sup>44</sup>

The 'iron dolphins' form part of the support for the street lamps along the Victoria Embankment by the Thames in London.

***Chapter LII, Section iii.***

**Stanza 3.** Walcott sees 'Telemachus', son of the absent Odysseus, in himself.

Telemachus grew up during the Odyssey, seeking news of his father, rather as Walcott grew up wanting to know about Warwick and explores him in Plunkett.

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***Chapter LIII.***

The village attends Maud's funeral and Walcott the author steps into and out of the story, seeing her as his mother who was soon to die. As the coffin leaves the church, Helen and Achille meet and she tells him she is coming home.

***Chapter LIII, Section i.***

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<sup>43</sup> British Army website <<http://www.army.mod.uk/events/ceremonial/2355.aspx>> [accessed 8 February 2010]

<sup>44</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p. 16.

**Stanzas 2-4.** Walcott/the Narrator resists the temptation to see Helen as the classical beauty who had been the cause of the Trojan War.

**Stanzas 7-8.** ‘the chasm that widened at Glen-da-Lough’ was the English army’s destruction of the monastery, an early incident that was eventually followed by the Protestant versus Catholic struggles that have marred peaceful coexistence in England and Ireland. The Walcott family experienced the effects of that antagonism as a Methodist family in a St Lucia where Catholicism was dominant (see Critical Introduction: Autobiography).

‘deep as a daisied trench’ could echo George Eliot’s ‘the grass all deep and daisied’ (*The Mill on the Floss*, Chapter 38) but refers to the open grave.

*Chapter LIII, Section ii.*

**Stanza 3.** *Les Nymphéas* is a series of Monet paintings of the pond and waterlilies at his garden in Giverny, some 250 over 25 years from the mid-1890’s. The arching bridge is a feature in some of the paintings. Monet used series painting to explore all aspects of changing light over time.<sup>45</sup> Walcott longs for similar exactness.

**Stanza 8.** ‘scrim’ (a light material) implies both the physical thinness of paper and the insubstantial nature of the verse. The term (scrim’s light, open weave is used to create illusions of ghosts or mist on stage) is in keeping with Walcott’s extensive work for

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<sup>45</sup> Joel Isaacson, *Claude Monet: Observation and Reflection* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1978), pp. 44-48.



the theatre, but may also come from reading Wilbur's poem 'A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra', where the water 'makes/A scrim or summery tent'.<sup>46</sup>

**Stanza 10.** 'his wattled throat' gives him another point of resemblance to the frigate bird, with the red gular flap on its throat.

**Stanza 12.** 'Saltibus' is a series of four waterfalls at the place of the same name in Choiseul, St Lucia.

*Chapter LIII, Section iii.*

**Stanza 1.** 'his red hands' refers to Plunkett's hands being literally red (a fair-skinned white man in the sun) or also metaphorically, with the shared guilt of the white man for what was done to the black. Red is the colour of empire throughout the poem.

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*Chapter LIV.*

The Narrator sees Plunkett the day after the funeral and recognises his belonging in island society. He remembers how they both sought to impose some false view on Helen, whether History or Literature, and knows they should have seen her as she is. He longs to enter 'that light beyond metaphor', to describe what he sees, not the classical images of his past reading. He begins to write simply.

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Wilbur, *Things of This World* (1956) and *New and Collected Poems* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 271.

*Chapter LIV, Section i.*

**Stanza 5.** ‘Troumasse River’ (or *Troumassée River*) is near Micoud in the south east of St Lucia.

**Stanza 8.** Located in the area of Choiseul, ‘Saltibus’, ‘D’Elles Soeurs’ and ‘LaFargue River’ are perhaps 15 miles from Castries where Plunkett will have been shouting his orders.

**Stanza 13.** ‘Kipling’s requiem’ probably refers to Kipling’s poem *Recessional*, adopted as a highly popular hymn (no fewer than fifty three tunes are associated with it).<sup>47</sup> A recessional hymn is sung at the end of a church service and with Kipling’s words may also be seen as anticipating the end of empire. It may have been used at parade services for the cadets Plunkett drilled. It ends:

The tumult and the shouting dies,  
The captains and the kings depart;  
Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice,  
A humble and a contrite heart.  
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet  
Lest we forget -- lest we forget!<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Brian Mattinson, *Kipling and Music: ‘The Tunes that Mean So Much’* from <[http://www.kipling.org.uk/rg\\_music1.htm](http://www.kipling.org.uk/rg_music1.htm)> [accessed 19 Feb 2011]

<sup>48</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *The Complete Verse*, p. 266.

**Stanzas 10 and 15-16.** Hamner comments how a single word can open a gap in post-colonial society.<sup>49</sup>

**Stanza 17.** Alludes to ‘conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman’, a disciplinary offence under some military codes.

**Stanza 18.** Walcott accepts willingly the wound of the imperial language (and all that went with that) in Plunkett’s English. See note to IV/ii/6.

*Chapter LIV, Section ii.*

**Stanza 3.** ‘I despised any design/that kept to a chart, that calculated the winds./My inspiration was impulse’ says something of Walcott himself. Though a formalist poet, he varies the strict measure much of the time. There is also an echo of this rejection of maps (a colonialist tool) in the epigraph from Baudelaire at the beginning of *Epitaph for the Young*, forty years earlier:

Pour l’enfant, amoureux de cartes et d’estampes,  
L’univers est égal à son vaste appétit.  
  
Ah ! Que le monde est grand à la clarté des lampes !  
  
Aux yeux du souvenir que le monde est petit !<sup>50</sup>

What he is about, in *Omeros* as in much of the poetry that preceded it, is reclaiming St Lucia and the Caribbean through a remapping that includes his ‘naming of parts’

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<sup>49</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, p. 143.

<sup>50</sup> ‘For the child, in love with maps and stamps, /the universe is equal to his vast appetite./Ah! How big the world is in the brightness of lamps!/How small in the eyes of memory!’

recitations of scenery (I/i/8-11), vegetation (I/ii/6-7), weather (IX/iii/1-25), birds (XVI/ii/3-7), foods etc. and the Plunketts' road trip (X/ii/1-32), Hector's drives to and from the airport (XXII/ii/14-17) and Achille and Philoctete's sea voyage (LX/i/17-21). He is making his 'little world' a universe adequate to sustain the spirit of its people, a place that is lived in, not a map to be administered.

**Stanza 8.** This echoes *Another Life*, line 2123, 'and the last thing the breeze needs is my exhilaration'.

#### ***Chapter LIV, Section iii.***

**Stanza 1.** 'All that Greek manure under the green bananas' is ambiguous. The classics might be so much bull-droppings, or they may be nurturing the bananas. The green bananas may be young and fresh, or they may be naïve. Walcott means both, of course (see Critical Introduction: Dualism).

**Stanzas 4-7.** When Walcott does at last seek to write in 'that light beyond metaphor' he uses one last simile about healing, 'a hut closed like a wound', then reports what he sees as it is, without metaphor. That will not last, of course, but from now on the metaphors will not be Greek.

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#### ***Chapter LV.***

The village celebrates Christmas, then Achille and Philoctete don the androgynous African costumes of calabash masks and banana leaves and go to dance in the streets of Castries. Achille and Philoctete are both strengthened by the dance.

*Chapter LV, Section i.*

**Stanzas 1-8.** The description of St Lucia's traditional Christmas feasting is strongly reminiscent of Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, where there is the same loving and nostalgic listing of foods, including black pudding, and drinks on Martinique.<sup>51</sup> It is a feast of homely ritual, in contrast to the Christmas described at similar length in *Another Life*, where the tone is much more folk-mystical, redolent of spells and mysteries.<sup>52</sup> It shows an older man's memories at work.

**Stanza 1.** 'everything right and exact, everything correct' is a leonine rhyme.

'red sorrel' (not the same plant as green sorrel) is traditionally used to make a sorrel and ginger punch, or a tea served ice-cold at Christmas and New Year in the Caribbean.<sup>53</sup> Sea moss is used with condensed milk to make a supposedly aphrodisiac and potency-enhancing drink.<sup>54</sup> These drinks and the feast that follows are described with nostalgic affection.

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<sup>51</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, p. 81.

<sup>52</sup> Derek Walcott, *Another Life*, lines 2088-2103.

<sup>53</sup> <<http://www.chow.com/recipes/11327>> [accessed 10 February 2010]

<sup>54</sup> <<http://www.simplytrinicooking.com/2008/09/sea-moss-drink.html>> [accessed 13 Feb 2011]

**Stanza 5.** ‘black pudding’ is a blood sausage, made with rice or sweet potato as a base. ‘souse’ is cold pickled pork made from the cheapest cuts such as ears and cheeks.<sup>55</sup>

**Stanzas 8 and 15.** These stanzas show the paragraphic breaks in rhyme characteristic of *Omeros*. Each ends a sense-group and a new sense-group begins with a new rhyme pattern.

**Stanza 13.** ‘paille-banane’ or pay-bannann is a folk costume made of banana leaves, used by masqueraders.<sup>56</sup>

*Chapter LV, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 1 and 8.** The yellow dress is transformed from a European adornment of Helen as object-of-desire (see V/iii/3-6), to an African traditional costume for the warrior-woman (see LV/i/10-12). The message is both about the blending of cultures and about taking what you need from Western culture and making it your own.

**Stanza 3.** ‘his own son’ faintly echoes Book 9 of *The Iliad*, where Nestor tells Diomedes, ‘But of course you are young – you could be your own son.’<sup>57</sup>

**Stanzas 4-5.** ‘bellying’ contains echoes of ‘billowing’, an adjective often applied to sails. Walcott also puns on ‘labouring’ and ‘delivering’.

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

<sup>56</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

<sup>57</sup> Martin Hammond (translator), Homer’s *Iliad*, p. 134.

**Stanza 5.** This contains a reference to Archibald MacLeish's modernist poem 'Ars Poetica', which begins, 'A poem should be palpable and mute/as a globed fruit'.

According to Donaldson, when writing 'Ars Poetica' MacLeish had Fenollosa's comment in mind, that 'metaphor was the very essence of poetry' but not as exegesis or demonstration. Metaphor was 'experience'.<sup>58</sup> This sounds very close to Walcott's view of the world.

**Stanza 9.** The flying of 'Easter kites' is a Caribbean tradition, symbolic of the Risen Lord. Hundreds may be seen in the air at the same time. It is possible that the practice was introduced by indentured Indian labourers.

*Chapter LV, Section iii.*

**Stanzas 1-11.** This section is notable for the precision of its visual imagery. It is choreographic and could be used to reconstruct the steps.

**Stanzas 4 and 6.** The 'wand' and 'rod' carries meaning. Burton calls the slave-driver's rod a 'sinister manifestation' of power and quotes Roughley's 1823 *Jamaica Planter's Guide*, that it is 'the emblem of his rank and dignity'. Burton sees it 'transmuted and transformed into an instrument or symbol of counter-authority, in the stickfighter's baton [...] and in all the innumerable staffs, staves, swords, banners, and other emblems of popular counterpower that are ritualistically displayed during carnival.'<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Scott Donaldson, *Archibald Macleish: An American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), p. 150

<sup>59</sup> Richard D. E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean*, pp. 9-10

**Stanza 7.** The ‘eyes that never saw the light of this world’ were those who died during the Middle Passage and never reached the Caribbean.



***Book 7.***

Book 7 brings all of the stories to a conclusion and completes the healing process. In a Dantesque tour of the island and a visit to Malebolge with Seven Seas/Homer, the Narrator learns how to praise the island. Achille and Philoctete seek better fishing and a new home to the south, but return to their St Lucia home, Plunkett finds contentment and respect for the islanders, Seven Seas and Ma Kilman see how the island is changing with tourism, Helen is a waitress again, island life goes on. So does the sea.

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***Chapter LVI.***

Walcott/the Narrator has a last encounter with Seven Seas/Homer. He confesses he has never read Homer all the way through and is told to forget the gods and read the rest. Homer says that love of a woman is good, but the love of one's own people is greater.

***Chapter LVI, Section i.***

**Stanzas 2, 11 and 13.** The driftwood log that transforms itself into a man and back recalls the ending of *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, 'Lord, I have been washed from shore to shore, as a tree in the ocean.'<sup>1</sup> There, the image is of Makak surviving a

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Walcott, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 326.

spiritual Middle Passage and finding firm ground in which he can put down roots.

Here, it introduces the Narrator's spiritual journey through the Malebolge.

**Stanza 8.** The pounding of the surf (a crash followed by quieter ebbing) pronounces 'Omeros' in the dactylic (Greek) way. Walcott corrects it to *Omeros*, creolising it as he had done in II/iii/3-4.

**Stanza 10.** 'the forked, slow-wading wood' is another echo of Shakespeare's use of the adjective.

**Stanzas 10-11.** The image of manacles occurs as Walcott's mind drifts.

*Chapter LVI, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 1-2.** 'The path that Philoctete took' had earlier (IV/i/1) been shown to be north of the village of Gros Îlet and Walcott here 'It was a cape that I knew' is clearly talking of where his house now stands, overlooking Pigeon Island.

*Chapter LVI, Section iii.*

**Stanza 3.** 'chimera' was a mythical monster in Ancient Greece, made up of parts of several animals. Homer's *The Iliad* Book 6 describes it as 'a lion in front, a snake behind and a goat in the middle'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Hammond (translator), *The Iliad*, p. 95.

**Stanza 4.** The ‘drifter’ is Odysseus, hero of *The Odyssey*, who takes ten years to return home to Ithaca after the end of the Trojan War.

**Stanza 5.** The hyphenated gods Walcott refers to are those with epithets in *The Iliad* Book 1 and elsewhere, like Zeus the cloud-gatherer or the ox-eyed queen Hera, while the producers must be Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.<sup>3</sup>

The reference to Medusa’s shield is not strictly accurate, but permits the rhyme. The shield is properly Athena’s, to whom Perseus gave Medusa’s head to put on her shield. The Medusa shield was famously painted by Caravaggio.

**Stanza 9.** ‘numbered peace’ has faint echoes of Heaney’s ‘numbered heads’ in *Seeing Things*.<sup>4</sup>

**Stanza 10.** ‘the freshest of all your readers’ could have several meanings. Apart from its standard meanings, *fresh* when informal can mean *impudent* or, in slang, *first rate*, *excellent*. Either might apply here, but the second fits the context better. Walcott is saying that to ‘read’ Homer best one needs to listen to the sea and the trees. At the same time, he may be joking against himself with a pun; ‘fresh’ in Barbadian dialect means ‘bad-smelling’.<sup>5</sup>

The reference to ‘Master’ here and above in Stanza 8 echoes Dante to Virgil in Canto I Line 85 of the *Inferno*, ‘tu se’ lo mio maestro e’l mio autore’.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Hammond (translator), *The Iliad*, pp. 17-18 etc.

<sup>4</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p.16.

<sup>5</sup> *New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006)

**Stanza 11.** ‘the chumbling cove’ is a difficult phrase. Dictionaries give various definitions of ‘to chumble’, including to nibble or chew<sup>6</sup> and to give fellatio<sup>7</sup>, neither of which seems quite right here. In *A Clockwork Orange*, Anthony Burgess invents ‘chumbling’ as slang for ‘to chew and mumble at the same time’: ‘The old veck began to make sort of chumbling shooms – ‘wuf waf wof’’.<sup>8</sup> This seems to come close to the sound of the waves from the cove as the pair descend. Alternatively, there is a dialect word ‘chimble’ or ‘chumble’, giving a meaning of ‘the crumbling cove’.<sup>9</sup>

**Stanzas 12-13.** The double-caesural form of the lines is set out on the page to imitate the goat track descending.

**Stanza 15.** ‘the light’s coins on my eyes’ refers to the custom of laying coins on the eyes of a corpse, said by some to provide it with the fare to pay the ferryman to carry it over the river Styx to the underworld, though that was originally a coin in the mouth. Here the reference is that Homer’s eyes were dead, not he himself.

**Stanza 17.** The introduction of the word ‘love’ at the end of Line 2 is a little strange. This impression is heightened by Line 2 not rhyming with any other.

**Stanzas 17-18.** Walcott has *Omeros* endorse his writing of the book. Walcott follows him in admiration of women and in preferring the love of his people. ‘Love is good, but the love of your own people is//greater.’

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<sup>6</sup> Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Oxford University Press/Clarendon, 1933)

<sup>7</sup> <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=chumbling>> [accessed 5 April 2010]

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (London, Penguin Books, 2008), Part 1.

<sup>9</sup> *English Dialect Dictionary* ed. Joseph Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898)

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*Chapter LVII.*

Walcott goes on a dream voyage with Homer. Together they sing the island's praise.

Charon brings them to Marigot Bay, where the English fleet hid from the French.

Walcott sees that no man can claim Helen's and the island's beauty.

*Chapter LVII, Section i.*

**Stanza 1.** The short white-spined sea urchin *tripneustes ventricosus* (the 'sea-egg') is fished in the Caribbean for its roe.<sup>10</sup> Other varieties have more dangerously long or toxic spines.

**Stanza 3.** The khaki mongrel represents another of Walcott's personae in the book. When *Omeros* shouts 'Home!' here, the dog only retreats to an almond grove. The command can be read as a statement, Walcott saying, through *Omeros*, that the island is home.

**Stanza 13.** *Omeros* alludes to Exodus 14:22: 'And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground'.

**Stanzas 14-18.** Walcott attributes his own ability to praise the island to Homer's inspiration.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

**Stanza 15.** ‘A Genoan wanderer’ could be taken to mean Columbus, who was born in Genoa. However, it is now known that Columbus never set foot on St Lucia, so Walcott is making a little free with his history. Ironically, Columbus Square in Castries has been renamed Derek Walcott Square.<sup>11</sup>

**Stanza 16.** The island is named ‘The Helen of the West’ so ‘a wild wife’ must be taken to be Helen, although it was not Helen’s choice to go to Troy.

*Chapter LVII, Section ii.*

**Stanza 1.** ‘The charred ferryman’ is a visual pun on Charon, who rowed the dead across the Acheron in Greek myth.

**Stanza 2.** ‘gravedigger’s breath’ is ambiguous. It could mean ‘alcoholic’, from taking a nip at the bottle while digging, or by transference ‘smelling of the grave’, or ‘visible’, from digging the graves in the early morning when breath mists in the air. Compare with XIV/i/4, ‘with the marsh-breath of an embalmer’.

**Stanza 7.** ‘Marigot’ is the land-locked bay where a British fleet was hidden by Admiral Barrington in 1778, four years before the Battle of the Saints. Hamner unpacks the compressions of history and geography Walcott resorts to here and in the following section.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <[http://www.stlucia.gov.lc/saint\\_lucia/the\\_name\\_saint\\_lucia.htm](http://www.stlucia.gov.lc/saint_lucia/the_name_saint_lucia.htm)> [accessed 20 Nov 2010]

<sup>12</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, p. 150.

*Chapter LVII, Section iii.*

**Stanza 3.** The reference is to Helen's teichoscopeia in *The Iliad* Book 3, where she views the Greek army from the walls of Troy.

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*Chapter LVIII.*

The pilgrimage continues on land, to Soufrière, Malebolge, where Walcott sees those who have exploited the island. *Seven Seas* shows him himself as a writer and as Homer, he saves him from joining the poets in their pit.

*Chapter LVIII, Section i.*

**Stanzas 3-6.** Walcott has fought long and openly against land speculation and the building of 'Hotel, hotel, hotel, hotel, hotel and a club: the Bitter End' (*Another Life*, line 3579). Since the publishing of *Omeros*, he has resisted in vain the building of a resort on the slopes between the Pitons, ironically called Jalousie. Burnett reports that in his poem, 'Litany to the Pitons', he wrote 'Jalousie is one of the Seven Deadly Sins,/Greed is another'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, p. 53.

**Stanza 4.** ‘Hephaestus’ and ‘Ogun’ are the Greek and Haitian gods of smithing, iron and fire. Ogun is a Yoruba god in origin.<sup>14</sup> Hephaistos was revered because his craft meant men lived better than beasts, sentiments that could apply to poetry.<sup>15</sup>

**Stanzas 9-10.** Casinos were banned on St Lucia, but pressure was building when *Omeros* was written. The first was due to open for tourists in Gros Îlet in 2006, but did not materialise. The first was then due in 2010 in Rodney Bay but again was slow to complete its application process, 10 years after Parliament approved the legislation. St Lucians may work in casinos but may not gamble there.<sup>16</sup> Walcott had written before against the destructive effects of gaming tourism in ‘The Virgins’, ‘the roulettes spin/rustily to the wind’.<sup>17</sup>

**Chapter LVIII, Section ii.**

**Stanza 1.** Walcott bemoans the decline of beauty, where nightingales have forgotten to sing like Homer and cameras reduce his ‘wine-dark’ sea to snapshots.

**Stanza 5.** Walcott’s ‘skill with one oar’ is writing.

**Stanza 13.** Hector’s ghost shouldering an oar is Dantesque *contrapasso*, the serving of a punishment in Hell that fits his sin. At the same time, the image reminds of

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Seltman, *The Twelve Olympeans* (London: Pan, 1952), pp. 92-101 and William Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria* p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> Apostolos N. Athanassakis, *The Homeric Hymns: Translation, Introduction, and Notes*, p. 63.

<sup>16</sup> Jamaica Gleaner 23 September 2009 and  
<<http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20090923/business/business8.html>>  
[accessed 11 February 2010]

<sup>17</sup> Derek Walcott, *Sea Grapes*, p. 10.



Hemingway's Old Man, returning from his epic fight with the marlin and the sharks and struggling home with the mast.<sup>18</sup>

**Stanzas 17-18.** Walcott allows Hector a Christian forgiveness.

*Chapter LVIII, Section iii.*

**Stanza 4.** This is the Malebolge, the eighth circle of hell Dante reserved for those who consciously commit fraud. Walcott sets out a strong criticism of facile poetry, that it deals only in appearances, its main tool the simile. The metaphor, his tool of choice, enriches the subject much more and though he uses simile, it occurs much less often in his work. The criticism may be more personal and directed against Craig Raine among others. Raine was poetry editor at Faber from 1981, and Walcott published three collections with Faber during his tenure. At that time, Raine's own poetry was the 'Martian' style he established, packed with visual similes.

**Stanza 6.** *Omeros* grips Walcott's hand (i.e. guides his writing) to move him away from the poets who write only of the surface of things.

**Stanzas 8-13.** It is clear that Walcott regards *Omeros* as a step forward both in his ability to deploy language and in his vision of St Lucia. He is reborn. Part of his rebirth is the recognition that he had been exploiting the poverty of the islanders.

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<sup>18</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, p. 94.

**Stanza 12.** ‘The god of the yawning year’ is Janus, the two-headed god who looks forward and back.

**Stanza 13.** The ‘blackbirds bickering at breakfast’ is a direct reference back to II/ii/12, where Seven Seas heard the same thing. By association, Walcott picks up Seven Seas/Homer’s ‘recounting the past/of another sea, measured by the stroking oars’ (II/ii/13) and the invocation that followed that, ‘O open this day with the conch’s moan, Omeros’ (II/ii/14) and makes it the past, replacing it with the opening lines of Chapter LIX, where his total absorption with the classical becomes a footnote only, marked by an asterisk. He also moves from his ‘blindness’ to his light being clear.

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***Chapter LIX.***

Walcott sees his path as a writer clearly. The sea and a fresh people are there for him. All is new, without any History, all erased and freshly written. Achille represents a new culture, a new nation. Achille rages at being treated by the tourists as part of the picturesque scene.

***Chapter LIX, Section i.***

**Stanzas 1-5.** The asterisk images of the starfish and the palm fronds emphasise Walcott’s own unimportance, a footnote to a fresh existence which Achille, the bittern, the pelicans all share.

**Stanzas 5-6.** The beach cleaners become sibyls, preparing to write their prophecies in sand. At the same time, Walcott implies that they sweep away what his crab's hand, moving sideways, has previously written, leaving him to see Philoctete as it were on a blank page, the Caribbean's 'immeasurable emptiness'.

**Stanza 9.** The task of writing is holy. This prefigures Achille's thought, at LX/i/14, that his work as a fisherman was prayer. Walcott said in 1986, 'I have never separated the writing of poetry from prayer. I have grown up believing it is a vocation, a religious vocation.'<sup>19</sup>

**Stanzas 10-15.** The sea symbolises the power of Nature to renew, a constant that ignores the petty doings of men.

**Stanza 12.** *The Book of Gilgamesh* may be the oldest existing epic, written circa 2700 BC about the deeds of Gilgamesh, king of the city of Uruk in Sumer, on the Euphrates.

'or whose sword severed whose head in the *Iliad*.' Walcott uses two weak caesurae and has a leonine rhyme on each: sword, head, *Iliad*.

**Stanza 13.** 'sough' meaning 'sighing' can have two pronunciations, 'sow' and 'suff'. The former is more usual and the latter can have an alternative meaning of 'a sewer or drain' in Northern England. Walcott clearly intends a 'suff' reading here.

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<sup>19</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Edward Hirsch, 'The Art of Poetry', reprinted in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, p. 68.

**Stanza 15.** Walcott states that the sea is without metaphors, yet, ironically, uses a metaphor to say this. The section ends with an iambic hexameter line (plus an extra unstressed syllable) that marks Walcott's last direct addressing of his master, using his creolised amphibrachic pronunciation, *Omeros*. He has rejected completely now his earlier association of the island and its inhabitants with the Greek myths.

*Chapter LIX, Section ii.*

**Stanzas 8-9.** 'History has simplified//him. Its elegies had blinded me with the temporal lament for a smoky Troy' Walcott admits that his vision of the island had been over-simplified by the classical metaphor, just as Achille is simplified by history showing him as a descendant of slaves.

**Stanza 10.** 'hybrid' is a key adjective in Walcott's philosophy. The combination of genes produces a stronger creature.

**Stanza 11.** 'coral parthenons' alludes to the Parthenon, temple of Athena above the city of Athens. The metaphor is a circular one, in that the original Parthenon is built of marble (metamorphosed limestone) on a limestone foundation, rocks that would have begun as deposits on the sea-floor.

**Stanza 12.** The Troumassé River in southeast St Lucia is known for its beautiful pools and waterfalls.

**Stanzas 14-15.** Walcott ends with a paean to Caribbean light that has endowed him not with sight but with an inner vision. This light is spiritual as much as physical.

Walcott has spoken of the sublimation in love of Dante's horrors, 'in a radiant light that swirls backward into a center', going on to speak of 'the *is*, the light, the *is*, the thing that is at the heart of being.'<sup>20</sup> He uses the concrete 'O' of the vocative as a symbol of the sun, the 'eye of heaven'.

*Chapter LIX, Section iii.*

**Stanza 2.** Achille recognises, perhaps instinctively, that objectification by the cameras is a form of reduction.

**Stanzas 7-8.** Achille is much more disturbed by the tourist cameras than was Philoctete in I/i/1. Philoctete's response was to exploit the tourists. Achille's more instinctive reaction is also more sound, in that tourism is indeed capable of stealing the soul of the island, perhaps has already done so. Five years before publishing *Omeros*, Walcott said, 'Once I saw tourism as a terrible danger to a culture. Now I don't, maybe because I come down here so often that perhaps literally I'm a tourist *myself* coming from America. But a culture is only in danger if it allows itself to be.'<sup>21</sup> In *Omeros*, he is repeating the warning.

**Stanzas 9-10.** The waiters scorn Achille for his primitive rage, but have themselves been simplified, wounded, by their yielding to tourism.

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<sup>20</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by J. P. White, *Green Mountains Review Vol 4 No 1* 1990, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 155.

<sup>21</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Edward Hirsch 1985, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, pp. 112-3.

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*Chapter LX.*

Achille and Philoctete set out to fish, but find the seas emptied by factory fishing.

Achille dreams of finding a home that still has the qualities St. Lucia is losing. They head south, past Soufrière, heading towards the Grenadines, but turn for home when they encounter whales.

*Chapter LX, Section i.*

**Stanzas 2-7.** Walcott makes an early comment on global warming.

*Chapter LX, Section ii.*

**Stanza 1.** Walcott told a journalist of his childhood trip by boat to Soufrière: ‘We went to Soufrière, where the Pitons [the island’s twin peaks] are, but the road from the capital, Castries, was torturous (sic), so we went by boat. It’s a terrific journey.’<sup>22</sup>

**Stanza 2.** The ‘vanishing race/of heroes’ are the pirogue fishermen being replaced by the factory trawlers.

*Chapter LX, Section iii.*

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<sup>22</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Antonia Windsor, ‘My St Lucia: poet Derek Walcott’ (London: *The Observer*, 17 January 2010), recorded in <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2010/jan/17/st-lucia-derek-walcott>> [accessed 11 February 2010]

**Stanzas 5-6.** The description of the boat swamped by the sea is reminiscent of Winslow Homer's painting, *Kissing the Moon*, in which the boat and its occupants are almost hidden by the wave crests. Hokusai's *Great Wave* also treats this subject in a similar way.

**Stanzas 6-7.** The description of the whales reminds of *Moby Dick*, without being a direct quotation. Ahab himself was referred to as Old Thunder and 'the frightening trough dividing the soul/from this life and the other' rings of Melville's style.

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### ***Chapter LXI.***

Plunkett remembers Maud, during a consultation with Ma Kilman as his fortune teller. As he leaves he has a vision of Maud. He learns contentment and respect and affection for the islanders.

### ***Chapter LXI, Section i.***

**Stanzas 6, 7, 9 and 16.** Plunkett has insights into his preferences that suggest more self-knowledge than might be expected of his RSM background.

**Stanza 9.** 'Etty/or Alma-Tadema'. William Etty (1787-1849) painted mainly male and female nudes, often in a classical setting, while Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912) also used classical settings for his mainly-clothed figures. Both worked in the Academic style and their paintings are static, posed and of their time.

**Stanzas 16 and 18.** The addressing of 'Tom' is cryptic. Plunkett is remembering his early days with Maud. He is talking to his tom cat, whose name we do not otherwise know.

**Stanzas 25-26.** The passage refers to Plunkett's dislike of the trappings of Ma Kilman's séance and his own inability to believe fully. However, the trappings are also those of Catholicism (candles, tinkling bell, incense, beads) and Walcott may be expressing his own feelings about that faith.

***Chapter LXI, Section ii.***

**Stanza 1.** Ma Kilman needs her cracked spectacles to see her visions. The cracks were attributed in XLIX/ii/7 to the spider (Anancy, the spider trickster of Ashanti origin in African/West Indian folk-lore).

**Stanza 11.** Plunkett's turning of the head away from Maud, losing his vision of her, is similar yet opposite to Orpheus, failing to save Eurydice from the underworld because he looked back at her.

***Chapter LXI, Section iii.***

**Stanzas 1-8.** Plunkett learns at last how to live with the island. Walcott said of incomers:



People who come out to the Caribbean from the cities and the continents go through a process of being recultured. What they encounter here, if they surrender to their seeing, has a lot to teach them, first of all the proven adaptability of races living next to each other [...] And then also in the erasure of the idea of history. To me there are always images of erasure in the Caribbean – in the surf which continually wipes the sand clean, in the fact that those huge clouds change so quickly.<sup>23</sup>

**Stanza 5.** ‘invisible voice’ is a neat, almost synaesthetic compression. Compare with ‘inaudible rays’ in LXII/ii/3.

**Stanza 8.** ‘the taut comforter’ is Maud’s quilt, made up on the bed in military fashion, taut enough to bounce a coin.

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### ***Chapter LXII.***

Seven Seas hears how tourism is taking over from the old way of village life, though the tourists fail to see the essential life there. Walcott draws the differences between the two Helens, shows how the birds have migrated and naturalised. History is irrelevant, forgotten by the children in their play.

### ***Chapter LXII, Section i.***

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<sup>23</sup> Derek Walcott, interviewed by Edward Hirsch 1985, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, p. 108.

**Stanzas 1-17.** Village life is changed by tourism.

**Stanza 3.** ‘vespers’ is the early evening service, Evensong.

**Stanza 5.** “*Salve Regina*” is a hymn in honour of the Virgin Mary, normally sung from Trinity Sunday until the Saturday before Advent (sometime in May/June until the end of November). As the story at this point has reached a date soon after Christmas (see LV/i/1 and LXII/i/1) it would have been more expected to refer to another of the Marian hymns, *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, but Walcott chose the more euphonic title.

**Stanza 10.** ‘cameras that, perniciously elegiac,/took shots of passing things’ The tourists’ fascination with celebrating things that are ‘passing’ (unimportant and in some cases dying out) is harmful to the image and self-esteem of the island.

**Stanza 14.** ‘the amusing museum’ The rhyming epithet is an ironic echo of the tourists’ reaction. More distant still are echoes of musing upon its exhibits and of an island that is a muse for Walcott.

***Chapter LXII, Section ii.***

**Stanzas 1-12.** Walcott draws the difference between History and the present, making a nonsense of the Trojan metaphor.

**Stanza 4.** ‘Pitons’ and ‘chitons’ is a sight rhyme, similarly spelled but differently pronounced.

**Stanza 6.** ‘sulking Achille’ echoes Achilles sulking in his tent in the Iliad.

**Stanzas 13-17.** The birds have settled and naturalised, learned a new language, ‘each origin/enriching the islands to which their cries were sewn.’ By implication, so can men. The birds are brown, black or white, English, African, Indian, Chinese or Persian, reflecting the Caribbean’s racial mix.

**Stanza 15.** ‘tea-sipping tern’ means the English. In 1756, Jonas Hanway wrote, in a diatribe against tea-drinking, ‘He who should be able to drive three Frenchmen before him, or she who might be a breeder of such a race of men, are to be seen sipping their tea! [...] Were they the sons of tea-sippers, who won the fields of Cressy and Agincourt, or dyed the Danube’s streams with Gallic blood?’<sup>24</sup>

It is lately a term of abuse in rivalry between the University of Texas (supposedly effete ‘white-collar’, ‘tea-sippers’) and the Texas A&M University (‘blue-collar’, ‘Aggies’, originally Agricultural and Mechanical College).

The tern seems to have appealed to Walcott here because of its white colour and its habit of dipping into water to fish.

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<sup>24</sup> Jonas Hanway, *An Essay on Tea* (London: H Woodfall, C Henderson, 1757), pp. 272-3

**Stanzas 19-20.** ‘Its map, riddled with bays/like an almond leaf’ seems to mean that each bay is like an almond leaf (having a long smooth curve), not that the almond leaf is riddled with bays (for its curve is unbroken).

**Stanzas 23 and 26.** ‘in a green flash’ refers to sunset over the sea, when blue spectrum light from the sun is the last to disappear, giving an effect that can last a few seconds. History’s moment is just as brief.

*Chapter LXII, Section iii.*

**Stanza 1.** The lizard stands on three legs, cooling each foot in turn. Walcott uses the image to introduce a cinematic metaphor, ‘panning’ like a film-shot from a camera mounted on a tripod.

**Stanzas 4-7.** The school children live in the present, not in History. This is a quality of childhood that Walcott would have the islanders adopt.

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*Chapter LXIII.*

Seven Seas and Ma Kilman talk of Statics, who has decided to make money in the USA, and Helen, who is making a child. Achille and Helen disagree over whether to give the baby an African name. Life goes on. Walcott sees all he needs in the island, without the Old World.

*Chapter LXIII, Section i.*

**Stanzas 5, 7 and 9.** There are some 40,000 migrant pickers in the Florida orange season. The trees can be 18 feet high and are picked by hand into sacks that weigh up to 90 lbs when full. The average earnings are about \$7 per hour, or \$7,000 in a season. Mechanical picking is being developed.<sup>25</sup>

Hurricanes have been known to destroy the crop and gang-masters can exploit the workers, who are often there illegally. The season is short and the workers face physical risks ranging from eye damage to pesticide residues.

**Stanza 6.** ‘outside children’ are the illegitimate children of a married man.<sup>26</sup>

**Stanza 13.** ‘true-true’ means ‘actual, genuine’. The doubling of an adjective for emphasis is a characteristic of Creole speech, as it also is (for example) in Nigerian Pidgin and in many root languages.<sup>27 28</sup>

*Chapter LXIII, Section ii.*

**Stanza 4.** Achille has remembered his conversation with Afolabe about not understanding his name (see XXV/iii/6-21) and wants the child to remember his

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<sup>25</sup> Rural Migration News <[http://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/more.php?id=357\\_0\\_3\\_0](http://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/more.php?id=357_0_3_0)> [accessed 17 February 2010]

<sup>26</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

<sup>27</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

<sup>28</sup> Bassey Ekpennyong, *Oracy in Nigerian English-based Pidgin as a product of colonial encounter* (TRANS: Internet Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaft, Nr 17, Sept 2010) at <[http://www.inst.at/trans/17Nr/1-3/1-3\\_ekpennyong17.htm](http://www.inst.at/trans/17Nr/1-3/1-3_ekpennyong17.htm)> [accessed 27 Feb 2011]

African blood through his own name. Helen wants the child to be Western in its roots.

**Stanza 5.** ‘standing’. Ma Kilman resorts to a pun and draws attention to it.

**Stanza 6.** ‘*songez ?*’ means ‘Remember ?’<sup>29</sup>

**Stanza 7.** ‘chanterelle’ (often pronounced ‘*chantwell*’) is the female lead singer of the carnival folk dance, the *belair*.<sup>30</sup>

**Stanza 10.** Seven Seas sits with his hands on his cane, ‘very still’. His fingers no longer beat out the rhythm of Greek oars (see II/ii/12-13). He is ‘the chanterelle,/the river griot/the Sioux shaman’ but no longer Homer.

*Chapter LXIII, Section iii.*

**Stanza 1.** ‘both sides of this text’ refers to the Old World/New World aspects of the story, but also to the first and second halves of the book, in which the classical metaphors (Greece/Battle of the Saints) are first established and then rejected.

**Stanzas 2-3.** ‘One, the New/World, made exactly like the Old, halves of one brain’ refers to the continental fit between Africa and South America.

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<sup>29</sup> Jones E. Mondesir, *Dictionary of St Lucian Creole*

<sup>30</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

**Stanzas 1-6.** Walcott advocates a balanced solution, both halves of the world fitting together, both hands rowing, ‘balance, weight, and design.’ The ‘rift in the soul’ should be closed, remembering Africa, but accepting that St Lucia ‘held all I needed of paradise’.

**Stanza 6.** ‘no other laurel but the *laurier-cannelle*’s’ may be a little disingenuous. At this stage, Walcott was a clear candidate for consideration by the Nobel Committee. King writes of 1992, when the award to Walcott was announced:

Walcott, who had been hoping for the award for decades, supposedly asked Sture Allén, the Permanent Secretary of the Nobel Academy, ‘Why me?’ and said that he was ‘honoured and shocked’. Which is possibly correct. Walcott thought that if he did not get it in 1990, when *Omeros* appeared he probably would not.<sup>31</sup>

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#### ***Chapter LXIV.***

An epilogue, in which Walcott revisits the people of his song. He leaves his ‘craft’, his three-year odyssey at an end. Achille too hauls up his canoe and heads home to Helen. The sea remains.

(See Critical Introduction: Metaphor for a discussion of the imagery in this chapter.)

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<sup>31</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*, p. 538.

*Chapter LXIV, Section i.*

**Stanzas 1-2.** With 'I sang of quiet Achille', Walcott echoes the opening of the Iliad:

'Sing, goddess, of the anger of Achilleus...'.<sup>32</sup>

By ending with the epic invocation, rather than starting with it, Walcott again subverts the conventions (see Critical Introduction: Narrative).

**Stanzas 4-5.** See note to LI/ii/4-5 on the use of 'w' to imitate water.

**Stanzas 6-13.** Walcott imagines his own death and burial.

**Stanza 7.** 'the brown cheek of a jar/from the clay of Choiseul' (see also XLIX/ii/10) may well refer to an object Walcott owned. Choiseul refers to itself as the craft capital of St Lucia and has several well-known potters.<sup>33</sup> Here the carafe may symbolise Walcott himself, a twin from the earth of St Lucia, weeping at his own death.

**Stanzas 7-8.** 'So much left unspoken/by my chirping nib!' Walcott used the image in *The Hotel Normandie Pool*, written in his fiftieth year ten years earlier: 'my pen's beak parted till we chirped one song'.<sup>34</sup> The image confirms Maud's guilt of the birds

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<sup>32</sup> Martin Hammond (translator), *Homer: The Iliad*, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> <<http://www.choiseulstlucia.com/ARTS%20&%20CRAFT/index.html>> [accessed 17 February 2010]

<sup>34</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Fortunate Traveller and Collected Poems*, p. 444.



of the island as a metaphor for the many peoples and languages of the Caribbean. See also XI/ii/8, where her needles and Plunkett's pen are directly compared.

**Stanzas 8 and 11.** 'earth-door' and 'earth-trough' are examples of Walcott using a kenning.

**Stanza 9.** 'the shells of my unpharaonic pyramid' refers to the heaped conch shells on his grave (see XLVI/i/4 for this practice). It is noticeable that, as in Chapter I, most of the imagery is local, with very few Old World metaphors. However, where in Chapter I the Old World images are harmful, here they are neutral or neutralised. So, the 'pyramid' is 'unpharaonic'. See also LXIV/ii/5-6, LXIV/ii/9-11, LXIV/ii/16-17 and LXIV/iii/4.

**Stanza 14.** 'a sail going out or else coming in' (see also XIII/ii/2-3) takes Walcott back to the clear sightedness of his childhood and the advice he received from his father in his earlier vision, to travel and then to return.

*Chapter LXIV, Section ii.*

**Stanza 1.** Walcott addresses the reader directly, a metafictional trick that also draws attention to the reader's role as tourist and voyeur.

**Stanza 1.** 'the Halcyon' is the Sandals resort (ironic coincidence with Helen's sandals or a deliberate reference by Walcott?) on Choc Bay, St Lucia. It is also mentioned in the poem 'Light of the World', which started to explore the themes that

Walcott follows through in *Omeros*. There, Walcott describes himself as a transient staying at the hotel.<sup>35</sup>

**Stanzas 1-3.** The wearing of provocative clothing for the tourists is described, ironically, as ‘the national costume’. The ‘madras head-tie’ is not just knotted, the knot is seen as ‘flirtatious’. Until tourism, the national costume was simply a madras skirt over a white chemise, with the madras head-tie knotted in different ways depending on the occasion.<sup>36</sup> The head tie was already a feature of dress when Breen wrote in 1844, ‘First you have the head-dress set off by the varied and brilliant colours of the Madras handkerchief, erected into a pyramid, a cone, or a castle, according to the fancy of the wearer.’<sup>37</sup>

**Stanzas 5-6.** Helen’s classical ‘profile on a shield’ is immediately balanced with a Caribbean ‘sinuous neck/longing like a palm’s’.

**Stanza 7.** ‘What a fine local woman!’ Walcott uses a classical anacreontic rhythm for the line where the reader is abandoning the classical metaphor of Helen of Troy.

**Stanzas 9-11.** The Greek myths are mentioned but ‘never’ happened here.

**Stanzas 10-11.** The image of Helen gripping his wrist is sexual, echoing Plunkett’s memory of Maud doing the same in LXI/i/14-15. Walcott admits the sensual nature of poetic composition.

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<sup>35</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Arkansas Testament*, p. 51.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*

<sup>37</sup> Henry H. Breen, *St Lucia: Historical, Statistical and Descriptive*, p. 196.

**Stanza 12.** ‘this language carries its cure,/its radiant affliction’ The language carrying the affliction is English, whose symbols contain the presumptions of empire. Used to effect, it can also be its own cure, if ‘The Empire writes back to the Centre’.<sup>38</sup> In Walcott’s metaphor, ‘it is the language which is the empire, and great poets are not its vassals but its princes.’<sup>39</sup>

Walcott’s craft (his writing) reluctantly lets go of its anchor, the classical literary tradition it has relied on for so long.

**Stanzas 13-14.** ‘its rhythm agrees/that all it forgot a swift made it remember’ The poem draws on its African (calypsonian) rhythms, picking up the message the swift carried of Walcott’s African origins, neglected in his classical obsession.

**Stanza 15.** ‘children/whose voices are surf under a galvanized roof’ refers to the once-common reciting in unison as an aid to learning.

**Stanzas 16-17.** The Cyclops was in ‘stories/we recited as children’. In other words, it is not something to concern adults.

**Stanza 17.** Polyphemus was the Cyclops whose flock was used by Odysseus (the smart man) to escape in Book 9 of the *Odyssey*, by clinging to the belly of one of the sheep.

***Chapter LXIV, Section iii.***

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<sup>38</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Times*, 3 July 1982.

<sup>39</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Muse of History*, p. 51.

**Stanzas 1-2.** ‘The wet mossed coral/sea-fans that winnowed weeds in the wiry water’

The alliteration on ‘w’ approximates the shape of the sea-fans.

**Stanzas 3, 4, 8 and 10.** Walcott has finally abandoned classical metaphor, but teases the reader by switching between the St Lucian and Greek forms of the name. The seemingly classical ‘Achilles’ proves to be a fisherman after all.

**Stanza 5.** ‘his hands gloved in blood’ is a dochmiac figure, traditionally used in Greek poetry for extreme distress (see Critical Introduction: Prosody). Here the only contest is between men seeking a livelihood and the fish they need.

**Stanza 8.** ‘aching Achilles/washed sand from his heels’ A double pun. Achaean (Greek) Achilles is leaving (showing a clean pair of heels), so that Creole Achille can claim the island.

**Stanza 9.** ‘He sniffed his name in one armpit’ Walcott gets in one last macaronic pun. The French for armpit is ‘*aisselle*’, close to ‘Achille’. The macaronic element was necessary if Achille was to be his Creole self.

**Stanza 11.** ‘A full moon shone like a slice of raw onion.’ Walcott’s final simile in the poem is in his new imagery, drawn from the ordinary experience of the islanders, not the classics of his education.

‘the sea’ has the last word, as it had virtually the first: ‘They sound like the sea that feed us/fishermen all our life’ (I/i/3). The Caribbean is essential to the life of the islands. Walcott exemplified this in XLVI/iii, where he had sea and land change places.